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By Lewis Padgett

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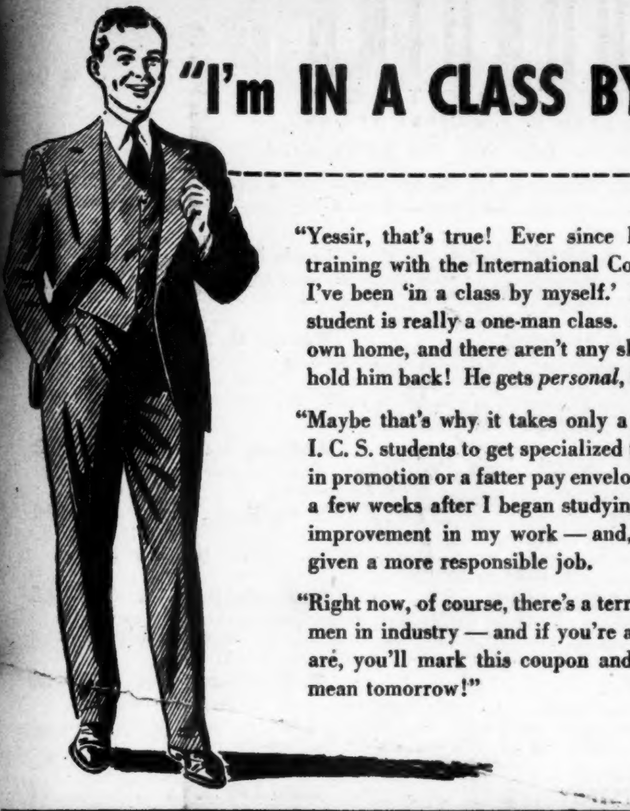

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Contents for June, 1943, Vol. XXXI, No. 4

John W. Campbell, Jr., Editor, Catherine Tarrant, Assistant Editor

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COVER BY TIMMINS

Illustrations by Fax, Kolliker, Kramer, Ley, Orban and Williams

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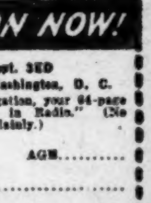

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Long Arm of Solar Law

The range over which the gravitational attraction of a star can effectively bind a satellite is immensely greater than even well-educated science-fiction followers normally realize. Pluto, at some three billion miles plus, is, of course, well within the Sun's fold; that the Sun might control a planetary body even twice as distant is understandable. A tenth planet the size of Earth six billion miles from Sol would not be discovered for centuries to come, save by accident, in all probability. Even space-flight wouldn't hasten its discovery greatly. The area of a six-billion-mile radius band 10 degrees wide around the System is definitely an astronomical quantity; you wouldn't send out exploratory spaceships to search it.

But further, that's so far, far short of the outer limit of the Sun's range of control that it could properly be considered as the innermost central volume of the complete System. If a scale map of the whole System, with all orbits of all bodies controlled by Sol's gravity were drawn, the Sun with the orbits of all planets, including a hypothetical six-billion-mile-distant planet, would have to be shown as *a single, pin-prick dot at the center.*

There would be several other pin-prick dots in the map—dots representing temporary intruders passing through the complete Solar System. Deep in the full-system map would be a dot representing Alpha Centauri; a little more than halfway out would be Sirius. In all, there would be over a dozen other stars that were passing *through* the Solar System, far inside the orbits of the outermost members.

For years, one of the dearly beloved plots of science-fiction has been based on the "what if a wandering star passed through the Solar System" theme. Now we know; a dozen or so stars are doing that right now. (And have been for the last million or so years, and will for a few millions more.) For the Sun's gravitational field can dominate the movement of cometary bodies that retire into space as much as fifteen light years, and probably somewhat more. The exact mechanism of a figure-eight orbit may have been worked out somewhere, but at least one cycle of such an orbit could readily involve a comet, Sirius and Sol.

It works out this way: If a body at an infinite distance were at rest with respect to the Sun, in a hypothetical space where the Sun and the isolated body were alone, it would fall to the Sun, eventually reaching the surface with a certain—high—velocity. By the time it had fallen to Earth's orbit it would be moving about twenty-six miles a second.

In reverse, a body shot out from the Sun at that critical velocity would retire to infinity; any lower velocity, no matter how little lower, would make it establish an orbit returning to Sol. Now suppose a comet shoots out from the neighborhood of the Sun with velocity sufficient to lift it fifteen light years against solar gravity. When it has reached that distance it would be forced to return, if no other bodies existed in space.

Actually, of course, other stars do exist—but they have surprisingly little effect on the problem. If the comet shooting out from Sol passed within three light months of Alpha Centauri—at that time it would be over four light years from Sol—our Sun, not Alpha Centauri, would be the dominant control! The reason's simple; the whole Solar System is moving more than twenty miles a second with respect to the Centauri System, and the comet, if it has a velocity that makes it a member of our System, will be moving much too fast for the Centauri System to have much effect on it. The Sun can affect it only because when it is at that immense distance, its velocity relative to the Sun, is to be measured in terms of miles per hour, not miles per second. Even if the comet passed within a million miles or so of one of the other stars inside the Solar System they could not capture it; it would enter the alien system with a high velocity, fall inward gaining still more speed, and depart on the other side with its original speed intact.

A binary star system could capture it, but the conditions for the capture would have to be adjusted with the nicety of a synthetic mathematician's model. The probability isn't zero, but it's darned low.

So Sol rules up to fifteen light years or more, if he has once captured a satellite. Comets swinging in such immense orbits would, naturally, come in toward the Sun and retire from it in practically straight lines. The vast distances covered, and the low relative speeds involved, make those orbits exceedingly long-term affairs—three million years or so between visits to the briefly experienced warmth of the Solar System's heart.

Between times, the body spends its time in the eternal night of interstellar space. If some strange form of intelligence could evolve on such a comet, their history could stretch back three hundred times as long as Man's—two million years or more—and reveal no hint that their world was a member of a planetary system. From the aphelion point of the orbit, several dozen alien stars would far outshine Sol; half a dozen might be much nearer than the inconspicuous, seemingly unimportant third-class G-O Sun. Yet Sol would still bind their world with the tenuous, but incredibly extensible arm of gravitational law!

With all that background in mind, I unhesitatingly make the prophecy that *homo sapiens* will never know more than a part of the total number of bodies which make up the Solar System. He's wonderful as a gadgeteer, but darned if I believe he'll ever make a gadget that can spot every cometary body in several hundred cubic light years of space! Anything that sensitive would pick up interference from every star in this galaxy, and probably be annoyed by the Greater and Lesser Magellanic clouds if not by Andromeda! THE EDITOR.

THE ANALYTICAL LABORATORY

This month's make-up left us with so little available space that there is no room for "In Times To Come," a decidedly foreshortened "Brass Tacks," and the "Lab" rather squeezed down. Particularly as we have two months to report on. As follows:

MARCH

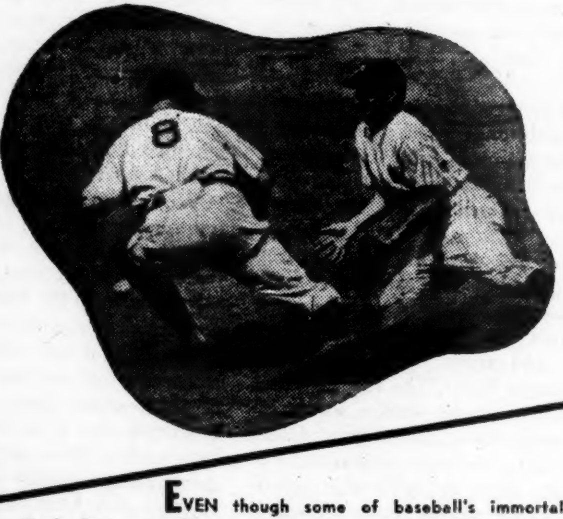
Place	*Story*	*Author*	*Point Score*
1.	The Weapon Makers	A. E. van Vogt	1.51
2.	Clash By Night	Lawrence O'Donnell	1.75
3.	Shadow of Life	Clifford D. Simak	2.77
4.	Q. U. R.	H. H. Holmes	3.36
5.	Shock	Lewis Padgett	3.89

APRIL

Place	*Story*	*Author*	*Point Score*
1.	The Weapon Makers	A. E. van Vogt	1.18
2.	Swimming Lesson	Raymond F. Jones	1.91
3.	Open Secret	Lewis Padgett	3.45
4.	Escape	Gilbert & Fischer	3.60
5.	Abdication	E. M. Hull	4.55

In the April "Probability Zero" department, Henry Kuttner collects the Biggest Liar prize, with Dan King's "A Snitch In Time" No. 2, and John Aiken's "Camouflage" winning him the title of Liar, Third Class.
THE EDITOR.

BASEBALL-AS USUAL!



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The World Is Mine

by Lewis Padgett

Gallegher, the mad—or at least cockeyed—scientist, got himself into real trouble that time. Corpses—several of them, but all, unpleasantly, his own—kept haunting him. And the Martians he'd accidentally brought up out of Time kept insisting, somewhat plaintively, the world was theirs.

Illustrated by Williams

"Let me in!" shrilled the rabbity little creature outside the window. "Let me in! The world is mine!"

Gallegher automatically rolled off his couch, reeling under the not unexpected gravity-pull of a colossal hangover, and gazed about in a bleary fashion. His laboratory, gloomy in gray morning light, swam into visibility around him. Two dynamos, decorated with tinsel, seemed to stare at him as though resentful of their festive garments. Why tinsel? Probably the result of those Tom-and-Jerries, Gallegher thought wanly. He must have decided that last night was Christmas Eve.

Brooding on the thought, he was recalled to himself by a repetition of the squeaky cry that had awakened him. Gallegher turned carefully, holding his head between steadying palms. A face, small, furry and fantastic, was regarding him steadfastly through the plexoglas of the nearest windows.

It was not the sort of face to see after a drinking bout. The ears were huge, round and furry, the eyes enormous, and a pink button of a nose shivered and twitched. Again the creature cried:

"Let me in! I gotta conquer the world!"

"What now?" Gallegher said under his breath, as he went to the door and opened it. The back yard was empty save for three remarkable animals that now stood in a row facing him, their furry white bodies fat and pushy as pillows. Three pink noses twitched. Three pairs of golden eyes watched Gallegher steadily. Three pairs of dumpy legs moved in unison as the creatures scuttled over the threshold, nearly upsetting Gallegher as they rushed past.

That was that. Gallegher went hurriedly to his liquor organ, mixed a quick one, and siphoned it down. He felt a little better—not much. The three guests were sitting or standing in a row, as usual, watching him unblinkingly.

Gallegher sat down on the couch. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"We're Lybblas," said the foremost.

"Ah." Gallegher thought for a moment. "What are Lybblas?"

"Us," the Lybblas said.

It seemed to be a deadlock, broken when a shapeless bundle of blankets in one corner stirred and exposed a nut-brown, withered face, seamed with far too many wrinkles. A man emerged, thin, ancient and bright-eyed. "Well, stupid," he said, "so you let 'em in, eh?"

Gallegher thought back. The old fellow, of course, was his grandfather, in Manhattan for a visit from his Maine farm. Last night— Hm-m-m. What had happened last night? Dimly he recalled Grandpa boasting about his capacity for liquor, and the inevitable result: a contest. Grandpa had won. But what else had happened?

He inquired.

"Don't you know?" Grandpa said.

"I never know," Gallegher told him wearily. "That's how I invent things. I get tight and work 'em out. Never know how, exactly. I invent by ear."

"I know," Grandpa nodded. "That's just what you did. See that?" He pointed to a corner, where stood a tall, enigmatic machine Gallegher did not recognize. It buzzed quietly to itself.

"Oh? What is it?"

"You *made* it. Yourself. Last night."

"I did, huh? Why?"

"How should I know?" Grandpa scowled. "You started fidding with gadgets and set the thing up. Then you said it was a time machine. Then you turned it on. Focused it into the back yard, for safety's sake. We went out to watch, and those three little guys popped out of empty air. We came back —in a hurry, I recall. Where's a drink?"

The Lybblas began to dance up and down impatiently. "It was cold out there last night," one of them said reproachfully. "You should have let us in. The world is ours."

Gallegher's long, horselike face grew longer. "So. Well, if I built a time machine—though I don't remember a thing about it—you must have come out of some different time. Right?"

"Sure," one of the Lybblas agreed. "Five hundred years or so."

"You're not—human? I mean—we're not going to evolve into you?"

"No," said the fattest Lybbla complacently, "it would take thousands of years for you to evolve into the dominant species. We're from Mars."

"Mars—the future. Oh. You—talk English."

"There are Earth people on Mars in our day. Why not? We read English, talk the lingo, know everything."

Gallegher muttered under his breath. "And you're the dominant species on Mars?"

"Well, not exactly," a Lybbla hesitated. "Not *all* Mars."

"Not even half of Mars," said another.

"Just Koordy Valley," the third announced. "But Koordy Valley is the center of the Universe. Very highly civilized. We have books. About Earth and so on. We're going to conquer Earth, by the way."

"Are you?" Gallegher said blankly.

"Yes. We couldn't in our own time, you know, because Earth people wouldn't let us, but now it'll be easy. You'll all be our slaves," the Lybbla said happily. He was about eleven inches tall.

"You got any weapons?" Grandpa asked.

"We don't need 'em. We're clever. We know everything. Our memories are capacious as anything. We can build disintegrator guns, heat rays, spaceships—"

"No, we can't," another Lybbla countered. "We haven't any fingers." That was true. They had furry mittens, fairly useless, Gallegher thought.

"Well," said the first Lybbla, "we'll get Earth people to build us some weapons."

Grandpa downed a shot of whiskey and shuddered. "Do these things happen all the time around here?" he wanted to know. "I'd heard you were a big-shot scientist, but I figured scientists made atom-smashers and stuff like that. What good's a time machine?"

"It brought us," a Lybbla said. "Oh, happy day for Earth."

"That," Gallegher told him, "is a matter of opinion. Before you get around to sending an ultimatum to Washington, would you care for a spot of refreshment? A saucer of milk or something?"

"We're not *animals!*" the fattest Lybbla said. "We drink out of cups, we do."

Gallegher brought three cups, heated some milk, and poured. After a brief hesitation, he put the cups on the floor. The tables were all far too high for the small creatures. The Lybblas, piping, "Thank you," politely, seized the cups between their hind feet and began to lap up the milk with long pink tongues.

"Good," one said.

"Don't talk with your mouth full," cautioned the fattest Lybbla, who seemed to be the leader.

Gallegher relaxed on the couch and looked at Grandpa. "This time machine business—" he said. "I can't remember a thing about it. We'll have to send the Lybblas back home. It'll take me a while to work out the method. Sometimes I think I drink too much."

"Perish the thought," Grandpa said. "When I was your age, I didn't need a time machine to materialize little fellows a foot high. Corn likker did it," he added, smacking withered lips. "You work too hard, that's what it is."

"Well—" Gallegher said helplessly. "I can't help it. What was my idea in building the thing, anyhow?"

"Dunno. You kept talking about killing your own grandfather or something. Or foretelling the future. I couldn't make head nor tail of it myself."

"Wait a minute. I remember—vaguely. The old time-traveling paradox. Killing your own grandfather—"

"I picked up an ax handle when you started in on that," Grandpa said. "Not quite ready to cash in my chips yet, young fellow." He cackled. "I can remember the gasoline age—but I'm still pretty spry."

"What happened then?"

"The little guys came through the machine or whatever it was. You said you hadn't adjusted it right, so you fixed it."

"I wonder what I had in mind," Gallegher pondered.

The Lybblas had finished their milk. "We're through," said the fat one. "Now we'll conquer the world. Where'll we begin?"

Gallegher shrugged. "I fear I can't advise you, gentlemen. I've never had the inclination myself. Wouldn't have the faintest idea how to go about it."

"First we destroy the big cities," said the smallest Lybbla excitedly, "then we capture pretty girls and hold them for ransom or something. Then everybody's scared and we win."

"How do you figure that out?" Gallegher asked.

"It's in the books. That's how it's always done. We know. We'll be tyrants and beat everybody. I want some more milk, please."

"So do I," said two other piping little voices.

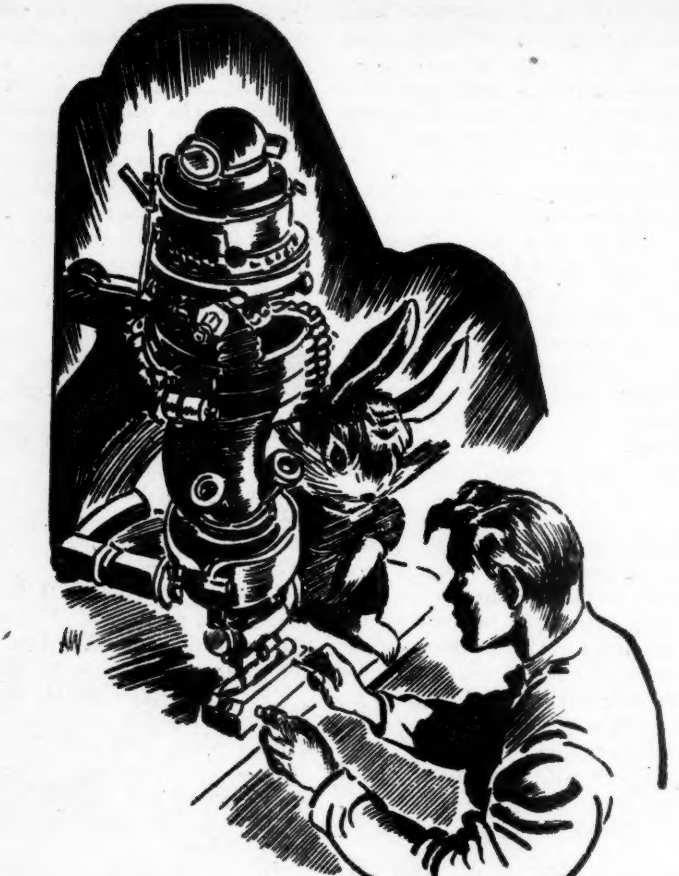
Grinning, Gallegher served. "You don't seem much surprised by finding yourselves here."

"That's in the books, too." *Lap-lap.*

"You mean—this?" Gallegher's eyebrows went up.

"Oh, no. But all about time-traveling. All the novels in our era are about science and things. We read lots. There isn't much else to do in the Valley," the Lybbla ended, a bit sadly.

"Is that all you read?"



"No, we read everything. Technical books on science as well as novels. How disintegrators are made and so on. We'll tell you how to make weapons for us."

"Thanks. That sort of literature is open to the public?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"I should think it would be dangerous."

"So should I," the fat Lybbla said thoughtfully, "but it isn't, somehow."

Gallegher pondered. "Could you tell me how to make a heat ray, for example?"

"Yes," was the excited reply, "and then we'd destroy the big cities and capture—"

"I know. Pretty girls and hold them for ransom. Why?"

"We know what's what," a Lybbla said shrewdly. "We read books, we do." He spilled his cup, looked at the puddle of milk, and let his ears droop disconsolately.

The other two Lybblas hastily patted him on the back. "Don't cry," the biggest one urged.

"I gotta," the Lybbla said. "It's in the books."

"You have it backward. You *don't* cry over spilt milk."

"Do. Will," said the recalcitrant Lybbla, and began to weep.

Gallegher brought him more milk. "About this heat ray," he said. "Just how—"

"Simple," the fat Lybbla said, and explained.

It *was* simple. Grandpa didn't get it, of course, but he watched interestedly as Gallegher went to work. Within half and hour the job was completed. It was a heat ray, too. It burned a hole through a closet door.

"Whew!" Gallegher breathed, watching smoke rise from the charred wood. "That's something!" He examined the small metal cylinder in his hand.

"It kills people, too," the fat Lybbla murmured. "Like the man in the back yard."

"Yes, it— What? The man in—"

"The back yard. We sat on him for a while, but he got cold after a bit. There's a hole burned through his chest."

"You did it," Gallegher accused, gulping.

"No. He came out of time, too, I expect. There was a heat-ray hole in him."

"Who . . . who was he?"

"Never saw him before in my life," the fat Lybbla said, losing interest. "I want more milk." He leaped to the bench top and peered through the window at the towers of Manhattan's skyline. *"Whee!* The world is ours!"

The doorbell sang. Gallegher, a little pale, said, "Grandpa, see what it is. Send him away in any case. Probably a bill collector. They're used to being turned away. Oh, Lord! I've never committed a murder before—"

"I have," Grandpa murmured, departing. He did not clarify the statement.

Gallegher went into the back yard, accompanied by the scuttling small figures of the Lybblas. The worst had happened. In the middle of the rose garden lay a dead body. It was the corpse of a man, bearded and ancient, quite bald, and wearing curious garments made, apparently, of flexible, tinted cellophane. Through his tunic and chest was the distinctive hole burned by a heat-ray projector.

"He looks familiar, somehow," Gallegher decided. "Dunno why. Was he dead when he came out of time?"

"Dead but warm," one of the Lybblas said. "That was nice."

Gallegher repressed a shudder. Horrid little creatures. However, they must be harmless, or they wouldn't have been allowed access to dangerous information in their own time-era. Gallegher was far less troubled by the Lybblas than by the presence of the corpse. Grandpa's protesting voice came to his ears.

The Lybblas scurried under convenient bushes and disappeared as three men entered the back yard, escorting Grandpa. Gallegher, at sight of blue uniforms and brass buttons, dropped the heat-ray projector into a garden bed and surreptitiously kicked dirt over it. He assumed what he hoped was an ingratiating smile.

"Hello, boys. I was just going to notify Headquarters. Somebody dropped a dead man in my yard."

Two of the newcomers were officers, Gallegher saw, burly, distrustful and keen-eyed. The third was a small, dapper man with gray-blond hair plastered close to his narrow skull, and a pencil-thin mustache. He looked rather like a fox.

He was wearing an Honorary Badge —which meant little or much, depending on the individual.

"Couldn't keep 'em out," Grandpa said. "You're in for it now, young fellow."

"He's joking," Gallegher told the officers. "Honest, I was just going to—"

"Save it. What's your name?"

Gallegher said it was Gallegher.

"Uh-huh." The officer knelt to examine the body. He blew out his breath sharply. *"Wh-ew!* What did you do to him?"

"Nothing. When I came out this morning, here he was. Maybe he fell out of a window up there somewhere." Gallegher pointed up vaguely to overshadowing skyscrapers.

"He didn't. Not a bone broken. Looks like you stabbed him with a red-hot poker," the officer remarked. "Who is he?"

"I don't know. Never saw him before. Who told you—"

"Never leave bodies in plain sight, Mr. Gallegher. Somebody in a penthouse—like up there—might see it and 'vise Headquarters."

"Oh. Oh, I see."

"We'll find out who killed the guy," the officer said sardonically. "Don't worry about that. And we'll find out who he is. Unless you want to talk now and save yourself trouble."

"Circumstantial evidence—"

"Save it." The air was patted with a large palm. "I'll 'vise the boys to come down with the coroner. Where's the 'visor?"

"Show him, Grandpa," Gallegher said wearily. The dapper blond man took a step forward. His voice was crisp with authority.

"Groarty, take a look around the house while Banister's televising. I'll stay here with Mr. Gallegher."

"O. K., Mr. Cantrell." The officers departed with Grandpa.

Cantrell said, "Excuse me," and came forward swiftly. He dug slim fingers into the dirt at Gallegher's feet and brought up the heat-ray tube. Smiling slightly, Cantrell examined the projector.

Gallegher's heart nosedived. "Wonder where that came from?" he gulped, in a frantic attempt at deception.

"You put it there," Cantrell told him. "I saw you do it. Luckily the officers didn't. I think I'll keep it." He slipped the small tube into his pocket. "Exhibit A. That's a damn peculiar wound in your corpse—"

"It's not my corpse!"

"It's in your yard. I'm interested in weapons, Mr. Gallegher. What sort of gadget is this?"

"Uh—just a flashlight."

Cantrell took it out and aimed it at Gallegher. "I see. If I press this button—"

"It's a heat ray," Gallegher said quickly, ducking. "For goodness sake, be careful!"

"Hm-m-m. You made it?"

"I . . . yes."

"And you killed this man with it?"

"No!"

"I suggest," Cantrell said, repocketing the tube, "that you keep your mouth shut about this. Once the police get their hands on the weapon, your goose will be cooked. As it is, no known gun can make a wound like that. Proof will be difficult. For some reason, I believe you didn't kill the man, Mr. Gallegher. I don't know why. Perhaps because of your reputation. You're known to be eccentric, but you're also known to be a pretty good inventor."

"Thanks," Gallegher said. "But . . . the heat ray's mine."

"Want me to mark it Exhibit A?"

"It's yours."

"Fine," Cantrell said, grinning. "I'll see what I can do for you."

He couldn't do much, as it proved. Almost anyone could wangle an Honorary Badge, but political pull didn't necessarily mean a police in. The machinery of the law, once started, couldn't easily be stopped. Luckily the rights of the individual were sacrosanct in this day and age, but that was chiefly because of the development of communication. A criminal simply couldn't make a getaway. They told Gallegher not to leave Manhattan, secure in the knowledge that if he tried, the televisor system would quickly lay him by the heels. It wasn't even necessary to set guards. Gallegher's three-dimensional photo was already on file at the transportation centers of Manhattan, so that if he tried to book passage on a stratoliner or a sea-sled, he could be recognized instantly and sent home with a scolding.

The baffled coroner had superintended the removal of the body to the morgue. The police and Cantrell had departed. Grandpa, the three Lybblas, and Gallegher sat in the laboratory and looked dazedly at one another.

"Time machine," Gallegher said, pressing buttons on his liquor organ. "Bah! Why do I do these things?"

"They can't prove you're guilty," Grandpa suggested.

"Trials cost money. If I don't get a good lawyer, I'm sunk."

"Won't the court give you a lawyer?"

"Sure, but that isn't the way it works out. Jurisprudence has developed into something like a chess game these days. It takes a gang of experts to know all the angles. I could be convicted if I overlooked even one loophole. Attorneys have the balance of political power, Grandpa. So they've got their lobbies. Guilt and innocence don't mean as much as getting the best lawyers. And that takes money."

"You won't need money," the fattest Lybbla said. "When we conquer the world, we'll set up our own monetary system."

Gallegher ignored the creature. "You got any dough, Grandpa?"

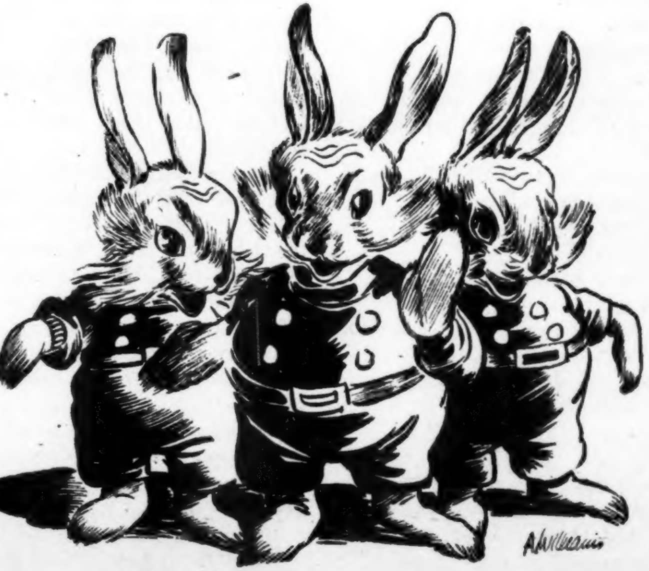
"Nope. Never needed much up in Maine."

Gallegher cast desperate eyes around the laboratory. "Maybe I can sell something. That heat-ray projector—but no. I'd be sunk if anybody knew I'd had the thing. I only hope Cantrell keeps it under cover. The time machine—" He wandered over and stared at the cryptic object. "Wish I could remember how it works. Or why."

"You made it, didn't you?"

"My subconscious made it. My subconscious does the ***damnedest*** things. Wonder what that lever's for." Gallegher investigated. Nothing happened. "It's fearfully intricate. Since I don't know how it works, I can't very well raise money on it."

"Last night," Grandpa said thought-



fully, "you were yelling about somebody named Hellwig who'd given you a commission."

A light came into Gallegher's eyes, but died swiftly. "I remember. A pompous big shot who's a complete nonentity. Terrific vanity complex. He wants to be famous. Said he'd pay me plenty if I could fix him up."

"Well, why don't you?"

"How?" Gallegher demanded. "I could invent something and let him pretend he'd made it, but nobody'd ever believe a pot-head like Rufus Hellwig could do more than add two and two. If that. Still—"

Gallegher tried the televisor. Presently a large, fat white face grew on the screen. Rufus Hellwig was an immensely fat, bald-headed man with a pug nose and the general air of a Mongolian idiot. By virtue of money, he had achieved power, but public recognition eluded him, to his intense distress. Nobody admired him. He was laughed at—simply because he had nothing but money. Some tycoons can carry this off well. Hellwig couldn't. He scowled at Gallegher now.

"Morning. Anything yet?"

"I'm working on something. But it's expensive. I need an advance."

"Oh," Hellwig said unpleasantly, "you do, eh? I gave you an advance last week."

"You could have," Gallegher said. "I don't remember it."

"You were drunk."

"Oh. Was I?"

"You were quoting Omar."

"What part?"

"Something about spring vanishing with the rose."

"Then I was drunk," Gallegher said sadly. "How much did I hook you for?"

Hellwig told him. The scientist shook his head.

"It just runs through my fingers like water. Oh, well. Give me more money."

"You're crazy," Hellwig growled. "Show results first. Then you can write your own ticket."

"Not in the gas chamber I can't," Gallegher said, but the tycoon had broken the beam. Grandpa took a drink and sighed.

"What about this guy Cantrell? Maybe he can help."

"I doubt it. He had me on the spot. Still has, in fact. I don't know anything about him."

"Well, I'm going back to Maine," Grandpa said.

Gallegher sighed. "Running out on me?"

"Well, if you've got more liquor—"

"You can't leave, anyway. Accessory before the fact or something of the sort. Sure you can't raise any money?"

Grandpa was sure. Gallegher looked at the time machine again and sighed unhappily. Damn his subconscious, anyway! That was the trouble with knowing science by ear, instead of the usual way. The fact that Gallegher was a genius didn't prevent him from getting into fantastic scrapes. Once before, he remembered, he'd invented a time machine of sorts, but it hadn't worked like this one. The thing sat sullenly in its corner, an incredibly complicated gadget of glistening metal, its focus of materialization aimed somewhere in the back yard.

"I wonder what Cantrell wanted with that heat ray," Gallegher mused.

The Lybblas had been investigating the laboratory with interested golden eyes and twitching pink noses. Now they came back to sit in a row before Gallegher.

"When we conquer the world, you won't have to worry," they told the man.

"Thanks," Gallegher said. "That helps a lot. The immediate need, however, is dough, and lots of it. I must get me a lawyer."

"Why?"

"So I won't be convicted for murder.

It's hard to explain. You're not familiar with this time sector—" Gallegher's jaw dropped. "Oh-oh. I got an idea."

"What is it?"

"You told me how to make that heat ray. Well, if you can give me an angle on something else—something that'll bring in quick money—"

"Of course. We'll be glad to do that. But a mental hookup would help."

"Never mind that. Start talking. Or let me ask questions. Yeah, that'll be better. What sort of gadgets do you have in your world?"

The doorbell sang. The visitor was a police detective, Mahoney, a tall, sardonic-looking chap with slick blue-black hair. The Lybblas, undesirous of attracting attention before they'd worked out a plan for world conquest, scuttled out of sight. Mahoney greeted the two men with a casual nod.

"Morning. We ran into a little snag at Headquarters. A mix-up—nothing important."

"That's too bad," Gallegher said. "Have a drink?"

"No, thanks. I want to take your fingerprints. And your eyeprints, if you don't mind."

"O. K. Go ahead."

Mahoney called in a lab man who had accompanied him. Gallegher's fingertips were pressed against sensitized film, and a specially lensed camera snapped the pattern of rods, cones and blood vessels inside his eyes. Mahoney watched, scowling. Presently the lab man showed the result of his labors to the detective.

"That tears it," Mahoney said.

"What?" Gallegher wanted to know.

"Nothing much. That corpse in your back yard—"

"Yeah?"

"His prints are the same as yours. And his eye-pattern, too. Even plastic surgery couldn't account for that. Who was that stiff, Gallegher?"

The scientist blinked. "Jumping tomcats! My prints? It's crazy."

"Crazy as the devil," Mahoney agreed. "Sure you don't know the answer?"

The lab man, at the window, let out a long whistle. "Hey, Mahoney," he called. "Come over here a minute. Want to show you something."

"It'll keep."

"Not long, in this weather," the lab man said. "It's another corpse, out there in the garden."

Gallegher exchanged horrified glances with Grandpa. He sat motionless even after the detective and his companion had tumultuously rushed out of the laboratory. Cries came from the back yard.

"Another one?" Grandpa said.

Gallegher nodded. "Looks like it. Come on. We'd better—"

"We'd better make a run for it!"

"No soap. Let's see what it is this time."

It was, as Gallegher already knew, a body. It, too, had been killed by a narrow hole burned through the fabricloth vest and the torso beneath. A heat-ray blast, undoubtedly. The man himself gave Gallegher a poignant shock—with good reason. He was looking at his own corpse.

Not quite. The dead man looked about ten years older than Gallegher, the face was thinner, the dark hair sprinkled with gray. And the costume was of an extreme cut, unfamiliar and eccentric. But the likeness was unmistakable.

"Uh-huh," Mahoney said, looking at Gallegher. "Your twin brother, I suppcse?"

"I'm as surprised as you are," the scientist said feebly.

Mahoney clicked his teeth together. He took out a cigar and lit it with trembling fingers.

"Now look," he said, "I don't know what kind of funny business is going on here, but I don't like it. I got goose bumps. If this stiff's eyeprints and fingerprints tally with yours, I . . . won't . . . like . . . it. I'll hate it like hell.

I don't want to feel that I'm going nuts. See?"

"It's impossible," the lab man said.

Mahoney shepherded them into the house and televised Headquarters. "Inspector? About that body that was brought in an hour ago—Gallegher, you know—"

"Found it?" the inspector asked.

Mahoney blinked. "Huh? I mean the one with the funny fingerprints—"

"I know what you mean. Have you found it or haven't you?"

"But it's in the morgue!"

"It was," the inspector said, "up to about ten minutes ago. Then it was snatched. Right out of the morgue."

Mahoney let that soak in briefly, while he licked his lips. "Inspector," he said presently, "I've got another body for you. A different one, this time. I just found it in Gallegher's back yard. Same circumstances."

"What?"

"Yeah. A hole burned through the chest. And it looks like Gallegher."

"Looks like him— What about those prints I told you to check?"

"I did. The answer is yes."

"It couldn't be."

"Wait'll you see the new corpse," Mahoney growled. "Send the boys over, will you?"

"Right away. What sort of crazy business—"

The connection broke. Gallegher passed drinks and collapsed on the couch, manipulating the liquor organ. He felt giddy.

"One thing," Grandpa said, "you can't be tried for murdering that first body. If it's been stolen, there's no *corpus delicti*."

"I'll be— That's right!" Gallegher sat up. "Isn't that so, Mahoney?"

The detective hooded his eyes. "Sure. Technically. Only don't forget what I just found outside. You can be gassed for his murder, once you're convicted."

"Oh." Gallegher lay back. "That's right. But I didn't kill him."

"That's your story."

"O. K. I'm sticking to it. Wake me up when the fuss is over. I've got some thinking to do." Gallegher slipped the siphon into his mouth, adjusted it to a slow trickle, and relaxed, absorbing cognac. He shut his eyes and pondered. The answer eluded him.

Abstractedly Gallegher realized that the room was filling, that the routine was gone over again. He answered questions with half his mind. In the end, the police left, bearing the second body. Gallegher's brain, stimulated by alcohol, was sharper now. His subconscious was taking over.

"I got it," he told Grandpa. "I hope. Let's see." He went to the time machine and fiddled with levers. "Oh-oh. I can't shut it off. It must have been set to a definite cycle pattern. I'm beginning to remember what happened last night."

"About foretelling the future?" Grandpa asked.

"Uh-huh. Didn't we get in an argument about whether a man could foretell his own death?"

"Right."

"Then that's the answer. I set the machine to foretell my own death. It follows the temporal line, catches up with my own future *in articulo mortis*, and yanks my body back to this time sector. My future body, I mean."

"You're crazy," Grandpa suggested.

"No, that's the angle, all right," Gallegher insisted. "That first body was myself, at the age of seventy or eighty. I'm going to die then. I'll be killed, apparently, by a heat ray. In forty years from now or thereabouts," he finished thoughtfully. "Hm-m-m. Cantrell's got that ray projector—"

Grandpa made a face of distaste. "What about the second corpse, then? You can't fit that in, I bet."

"Sure I can. Parallel time developments. Variable futures. Probability lines. You've heard that theory."

"Nope."

"Well—it's the idea that there are

an infinity of possible futures. If you change the present, you automatically switch into a different future. Like throwing a switch in a railroad yard. If you hadn't married Grandma, I wouldn't be here now. See?"

"Nope," Grandpa said, taking another drink.

Gallegher went ahead, anyway. "According to pattern *a*, I'm going to be killed by a heat ray when I'm seventy or so. That's one variable. Well, I brought back my dead body along the temporal line, and it appeared in the present. And, naturally, it altered the present. Originally, in pattern *a*, there was no place for the eighty-year-old dead body of Gallegher. It was introduced and changed the future. We automatically switched into another time track."

"Pretty silly, eh?" Grandpa mumbled.

"Shut up, Grandpa. I'm working this out. The second track—pattern *b*—is in operation now. And in that track I'm going to be killed by a heat ray when I'm about forty-five. Since the time machine's set to bring back my body the minute it's killed, it did just that—materialized my forty-five-year-old corpse. At which the eighty-year-old corpse vanished."

"Hah!"

"It had to. It was nonexistent in pattern *b*. When pattern *b* jelled, pattern *a* simply wasn't there any more. Likewise the first corpse."

Grandpa's eyes lit up suddenly. "I get it," he said, smacking his lips. "Clever of you. You're going to plead insanity, eh?"

"Bah," Gallegher snarled, and went to the time machine. He tried vainly to turn it off. It wouldn't turn off. It seemed to be fixed irrevocably in its business of materializing Gallegher's future probable corpses.

What would happen next? Temporal pattern *b* had taken over. But the *b* corpse wasn't intended to exist in this particular present. It was an *x* factor.

And *b* plus *x* would equal c. A new variable, and a new cadaver. Gallegher cast a harried glance into the back yard. As yet, it was empty. Thank Heaven for small mercies.

At any rate, he thought, they couldn't convict him of murdering himself. Or could they? Would the law about suicide hold? Ridiculous. He hadn't committed suicide; he was still alive.

But if he was still alive, he couldn't be dead. Utterly confused, Gallegher fled to the couch, gulped strong drink, and longed for death. He foresaw a court battle of impossible contradictions and paradoxes—a battle of the century. Without the best lawyer on Earth, he'd be doomed.

A new thought came, and he laughed sardonically. Suppose he were to be convicted of murder and gassed? If he died in the present, his future corpse would instantly vanish—naturally. No *corpus delicti*. Inevitably—oh, very inevitably—he would be vindicated after he died.

The prospect failed to cheer him.

Reminded of the need for action, Gallegher yelled for the Lybblas. They had got into the cookie jar, but responded guiltily to his summons, brushing crumbs from their whiskers with furry paws. "We want milk," the fattest one said. "The world is ours."

"Yes," said another, "we'll destroy all the cities and then hold pretty girls for—"

"Leave it," Gallegher told them tiredly. "The world will wait. I can't. I've got to invent something in a hurry so I can get some money and hire a lawyer. I can't spend the rest of my life being indicted for my future corpses' murders."

"You talk like a madman," Grandpa said helpfully.

"Go away. Far away. I'm busy."

Grandpa shrugged, donned a topcoat, and went out. Gallegher returned to his cross-questioning of the three Lybblas.

They were, he found, singularly unhelpful. It wasn't that they were recalcitrant; on the contrary, they were only too glad to oblige. But they had little idea of what Gallegher wanted. Moreover, their small minds were filled, to the exclusion of all else, with their own fond delusion. The world was theirs. It was difficult for them to realize that other problems existed.

Nevertheless, Gallegher persevered. Finally he got a clue to what he wanted, after the Lybblas had again referred to a mental hookup. Such devices, he learned, were fairly common in the world of the future. They had been invented by a man named Gallegher, long ago, the fat Lybbla said stupidly, not grasping the obvious implication.

Gallegher gulped. He *had* to make a mental hookup machine now, apparently, since that was in the cards. On the other hand, what if he didn't? The future would be changed again. How was it, he wondered, that the Lybblas hadn't vanished with the first corpse—when pattern *a* had switched to variable *b?*

Well, the question wasn't unanswerable. Whether or not Gallegher lived his life, the Lybblas, in their Martian valley, would be unaffected. When a musician strikes a false note, he may have to transpose for a few bars, but will drift back into the original key as soon as possible. Time, it seemed, trended toward the norm. Heigh-ho.

"What is this mental hookup business?" he demanded.

They told him. He pieced it out from their scatterbrained remarks, and discovered that the device was strange but practical. Gallegher said something about wild talents under his breath. It amounted to that.

With the mental hookup, a dolt could learn mathematics in a few moments. The application, of course, would require practice—mental dexterity must be developed. A stiff-fingered bricklayer could learn to be an expert pianist, but it would take time before his hands could be limbered up and made sufficiently responsive. However, the important point was that talents could be transferred from one brain to another.

It was a matter of deduction, through charts of the electrical impulses emitted by the brain. The pattern varies. When a man is asleep, the curve levels out. When he is dancing, for example, his subconscious automatically guides his feet—if he's a sufficiently good dancer. That pattern is distinctive. Once recorded and recognized, it can be traced later—and the factors that go to make up a good dancer traced, as by a pantograph, on another brain.

Whew!

There was a lot more, involving memory centers and so forth, but Gallegher got the gist of it. He was impatient to begin work. It fitted a certain plan he had—

"Eventually you learn to recognize the chart lines at a glance," one of the Lybblas told him. "It—the device—is used a great deal in our time. People who don't want to study get the knowledge pumped into their minds from the brains of noted savants. There was an Earthman in the Valley once who wanted to be a famous singer, but he was tone-deaf. Couldn't carry a note. He used the mental hookup, and after six months he could sing anything."

"Why six months?"

"His voice wasn't trained. That took time. But after he'd got in the groove he—"

"Make us a mental hookup," the fat Lybbla suggested. "Maybe we can use it to conquer Earth."

"That," Gallegher said, "is exactly what I'm going to do. With a few reservations—"

Gallegher televised Rufus Hellwig, on the chance that he might induce the tycoon to part with some of his fortune, but without success. Hellwig was recalcitrant. "Show me," he said. "Then

I'll give you a blank check."

"But I need the money now," Gallegher insisted. "I can't give you what you want if I'm gassed for murder."

"Murder? Who'd you kill?" Hellwig wanted to know.

"I didn't kill anybody. I'm being framed—"

"So am I. But I'm not falling, this time. Show me results. I make you no more advances, Gallegher."

"Look. Wouldn't you like to be able to sing like a Caruso? Dance like Nijinsky? Swim like Weissmuller? Make speeches like Secretary Parkinson? Make like Houdini?"

"Have you got a snootful!" Hellwig said ruminatively, and broke the beam. Gallegher glared at the screen. It looked as though he'd have to go to work, after all.

So he did. His trained, expert fingers flew, keeping pace with his keen brain. Liquor helped, liberating his demon subconscious. When in doubt, he questioned the Lybblas. Nevertheless the job took time.

He didn't have all the equipment he needed, and 'vised a supply company, managing to wangle sufficient credit to swing the deal on the cuff. He kept working. Once he was interrupted by a mild little man in a derby who brought a subpoena, and once Grandpa wandered in to borrow five credits. The circus was in town, and Grandpa, as an old big-top enthusiast, couldn't miss it.

"Want to come along?" he inquired. "I might get in a crap game with some of the boys. Always got on well with circus people, somehow. Won five hundred once from a bearded lady. Nope? Well, good luck."

He went away, and Gallegher returned to his mental hookup device. The Lybblas contentedly stole cookies and squabbled amicably about the division of the world after they'd conquered it. The machine grew slowly but inevitably.

As for the time machine itself, occasional attempts to turn it off proved only one thing: it had frozen into stasis. It seemed to be fixed in a certain definite pattern, from which it was impossible to budge it. It had been set to bring back Gallegher's variable corpses. Until it had fulfilled that task, it stubbornly refused to obey additional order. *"There was an old maid from Vancouver,"* Gallegher murmured absently. "Let's see. I need a tight beam here— Yeah. *She jumped on his knee with a chortle of glee—* If I vary the receptor-sensibility on the electromagnetic current— Hm-m-m— *And nothing on Earth could remove 'er.* Yeah, that does it."

It was night. Gallegher hadn't been conscious of the passing of hours. The Lybblas, bulging with filched cookies, had made no complaint, except occasional demands for more milk. Gallegher had drunk steadily as he worked, keeping his subconscious to the fore. He hadn't realized till now that he was hungry. Sighing, he looked at the completed mental hookup device, shook his head, and opened the door. The back yard lay empty before him.

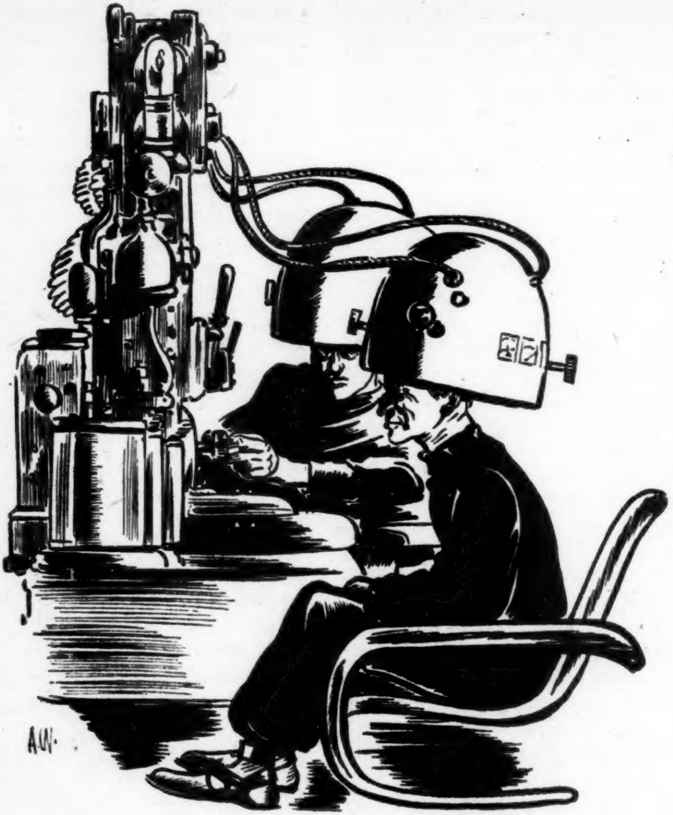
Or—

No, it was empty. No more corpses just yet. Time-variable pattern *b* was still in operation. He stepped out and let the cool night air blow on his hot cheeks. The blazing towers of Manhattan made ramparts against the night around him. Above, the lights of air traffic flickered like devil fireflies.

There was a sodden thump near by. Gallegher whirled, startled. A body had fallen out of empty air and lay staring blankly up in the middle of his rose garden. His stomach cold, Gallegher investigated.

The corpse was that of a middle-aged man, between fifty and sixty, with a silky dark mustache and eyeglases. Unmistakably, though, it was Gallagher. A Gallegher aged and altered by time-variable *c*—*c*, now, not *b* any more—and with a hole burned through the breast by a heat-ray projector.

At that precise moment, Gallegher



realized, corpse *b* must have vanished from the police morgue, like its predecessor.

"Uh-huh. In time-pattern *c*, then, he wasn't to die till he was over fifty—but even then a heat ray would kill him. Depressing. Gallegher thought of Cantrell, who'd taken the ray projector, and shivered slightly. Matters were growing more and more confusing.

Well, presently the police would arrive. In the meantime, he was hungry. With a last shrinking glance at his own dead, aged face, Gallegher returned to the laboratory, picked up the Lybblas on the way, and herded them into the kitchen, where he fixed a makeshift supper. There were steaks, luckily, and the Lybblas gobbled their portions like pigs, talking excitedly about their fantastic plans. They'd decided to make Gallegher their Grand Vizier.

"Is he wicked?" the fat one demanded.

"I don't know. Is he?"

"He's gotta be wicked. In the novels the Grand Vizier's *always* wicked. *Whee!*" The fat Lybbla choked on a bit of steak. "Ug . . . uggle . . . *ulp!* The world is ours!"

Deluded little creatures, Gallegher mused. Incurable romanticists. Their optimism was, to say the least, remarkable.

His own troubles engrossed him as he slid the plates into the Burner—"It

Burns Them Clean"—and fortified himself with a beer. The mental hookup device should work. He knew of no reason why it shouldn't. His genius subconscious had really built the thing—

Hell, it had to work. Otherwise the Lybblas wouldn't have mentioned that the gadget had been invented by Gallegher, long in their past. But he couldn't very well use Hellwig as a guinea pig.

A rattle at the door made Gallegher snap his fingers in triumph. Grandpa, of course! That was the answer.

Grandpa appeared, beaming. "Had fun. Circuses are always fun. Here's a couple of hundred for you, stupid. Got to playing stud poker with the tattooed man and the guy who dives off a ladder into a tank. Nice fellows. I'm seeing 'em tomorrow."

"Thanks," Gallegher said. The two hundred was penny-ante stuff, but he didn't want to antagonize the old goat now. He managed to lure Grandpa into the laboratory and explain that he wanted to make an experiment.

"Experiment away," said Grandpa, who had found the liquor organ.

"I've made some charts of my own mental patterns and located my bump of mathematics. It amounts to that. The atomic structure of pure learning, maybe— It's a bit vague. But I can transfer the contents of my mind to yours, and I can do it selectively. I can give you my talent for mathematics—"

"Thanks," Grandpa said. "Sure you won't be needing it?"

"I'll still have it. It's the matrix, that's all."

"Mattress?"

"Matrix. Pattern. I'll just duplicate that pattern in your brain. See?"

"Sure," Grandpa said, and allowed himself to be led to a chair where a wired helmet was fitted over his head. Gallegher donned another helmet and began to fiddle with the device. It made noises and flashed lights. Presently a low buzzing rose to a crescendo scream, and then stopped. That was all.

Gallegher removed both helmets. "How do you feel?" he asked.

"Fit as a fiddle."

"No different?"

"I want a drink."

"I didn't give you my drinking ability, because you already had your own. Unless I doubled it—" Gallegher paled. "If I gave you my thirst, too, you couldn't stand it. You'd die."

Muttering something about blasted foolishness, Grandpa replenished his dry palate. Gallegher followed him and stared perplexedly at the old fellow.

"I couldn't have made a mistake. The charts— What's the value of *pi?*" he snapped suddenly.

"A dime is plenty," Grandpa said. "For a big slice."

Gallegher cursed. The machine must have worked. It *had* to work, for a number of reasons, chief of which was the question of logic. Perhaps—"

"Let's try it again. I'll be the subject this time."

"O. K.," Grandpa said contentedly.

"Only—hm-m-m. You haven't got any talents. Nothing unusual. I couldn't be sure whether it worked or not. If you'd only been a concert pianist or a singer," Gallegher moaned.

"Hah!"

"Wait a minute. I've an idea. I've got connection at a teleview studio—maybe I can wangle something." Gallegher used the 'visor. It took some time, but presently he managed to induce Señor Ramon Firez, the Argentine tenor, to hop an air taxi and come down to the laboratory in a hurry.

"Firez!" Gallegher gloated. "That'll prove it, one way or the other. One of the greatest voices in the hemisphere! If I suddenly find myself singing like a lark, I'll know I can use the gadget on Hellwig."

Firez, it seemed. was night-clubbing but at the studio's request he shelved his nocturnal activities for the nonce and appeared within ten minutes, a burly, handsome man with a wide, mobile mouth. He grinned at Gallegher.

"You say there is trouble, that I can help with my great voice, and so I am at your service. A recording, is it?"

"Something of the sort."

"To win a bet, perhaps?"

"You can call it that," Gallegher said, easing Firez into a chair. "I want to record the mental patterns of your voice."

"Ah-h, that is something new! Explain, please!"

The scientist obediently launched into a completely meaningness jargon that served the purpose of keeping Señor Firez pacified while he made the necessary charts. That didn't take long. The significant curves and patterns showed unmistakably. The graph that represented Firez's singing ability—his great talent.

Grandpa watched skeptically while Gallegher made adjustments, fitted the helmets into place, and turned on the device. Again lights flashed and wires hummed. And stopped.

"It is a success? May I see—"

"It takes awhile to develop the prints," Gallegher lied unscrupulously. He didn't want to burst into song while Firez was still present. "I'll bring the results out to your apartment as soon as they're done."

"Ah-h, good. *Muy bueno.*" White teeth flashed. "I am always happy to be of service, *amigo!*"

Firez went away. Gallegher sat down and looked at the wall, waiting. Nothing happened. He had a slight headache, that was all.

"Through fiddling?" Grandpa demanded.

"Yeah. *Do-re-mi-fa-so—*"

"What?"

"Shut up. *I Pagliacci—*"

"You're crazy as a bedbug."

"I love a parade!" howled the frantic Gallegher, his tuneless voice cracking. "Oh, hell! *Seated one day at the organ—*"

"She'll be coming 'round the mountain," Grandpa chimed in chummily. *"She'll be coming 'round the mountain—"*

"I was weary and ill at ease—"

"She'll be coming 'round the mountain—"

"And my fingers wandered idly—"

"WHEN SHE COMES!" Grandpa blatted, always the life of the party. "Used to carry a tune pretty well in my young days. Let's get together now. Know 'Frankie and Johnnie'?"

Gallegher repressed an impulse to burst into tears. With a cold glance at Grandpa, he went into the kitchen and opened a bulb of beer. The cool catnip taste refreshed him, but failed to raise his spirits. He couldn't sing. Not in the manner of Firez, anyhow. Nor would six months of training his larynx work any appreciable change, he knew. The device simply had failed to work. Mental hookup, nuts.

Grandpa's voice called shrilly.

"Hey! I found something in the back yard!"

"I don't need three guesses," Gallegher said moodily, and went to work on the beer.

Three hours later—at ten p. m.—the police arrived. The reason for the delay was simply explained; the body in the morgue had vanished, but its disappearance hadn't been detected for some time. Then there had been a thorough search, yielding, of course, not the slightest result. Mahoney appeared, with his cohorts, and Gallegher waved them into the back yard. "You'll find it out there," he sighed.

Mahoney glared at him. "More funny business, eh?" he snapped.

"None of my doing."

The troupe poured out of the lab, leaving a slim, blond man eying Gallegher thoughtfully.

"How goes it?" Cantrell inquired.

"Uh— O. K."

"You got any more of those—gadgets—hidden around here?"

"The heat-ray projectors? No."

"Then how do you keep killing people that way?" Cantrell asked plaintively. "I don't get it."

"He explained it to me," Grandpa said, "but I didn't understand what he was talking about. Not then. I do now, of course. It's simply a matter of variable temporal lines. Planck's uncertainty principle enters into it, and Heisenberg, obviously. Laws of thermodynamics show clearly that a universe tends to return to the norm, which is our known rate of entropy, and variations from that norm must necessarily be compensated for by corresponding warps in the temporal-spatial structure of the universal cosmos-equation."

There was silence.

Gallegher went to the wall and drew a glass of water, which he poured slowly over his head. "You understand that, do you?" he asked.

"Sure," Grandpa said. "Why not? The mental hookup gave me your mathematical talent—which included vocabulary, I suppose."

"You been holding out on me?"

"Hell, no. It takes awhile for the brain to readjust to the new values. That's a safety valve, I guess. The sudden influx of a completely novel set of thought-patterns would disrupt the mind completely. It sinks in—three hours or so it takes. It's been that long or more, hasn't it?"

"Yeah," Gallegher said. "Yeah." He caught sight of the watching Cantrell and managed a smile. "A little joke Grandpa and I have between ourselves. Nothing to it."

"Hm-m-m," Cantrell said, his eyes hooded. "That so?"

"Yeah. Sure. That's all."

A body was carried in from the back yard and through the laboratory. Cantrell winked, patted his pocket significantly, and drew Gallegher into a corner.

"If I showed anybody that heat ray of yours, you'd be sunk, Gallegher. Don't forget that."

"I'm not. What the devil do you want, anyhow?"

"Oh—I dunno. A weapon like this might come in plenty handy. One never knows. Lots of holdups these days. I feel safer with this thing in my pocket."

He drew back as Mahoney came in, chewing his lips. The detective was profoundly disturbed.

"That guy in the back yard—"

"Yeah?"

"He looks like you, a bit. Only older."

"How about the fingerprints, Mahoney?" Cantrell asked.

The detective growled something under his breath. "You know the answer. Impossible, as usual. Eyeprints check, too. Now listen, Gallegher, I'm going to ask you some questions and I want straight answers. Don't forget you're under suspicion of murder."

"Whom did I murder?" Gallegher asked. "The two guys who vanished from the morgue? There's no *corpus delicti*. Under the new Codex, eyewitnesses and photographs aren't enough to prove murder."

"You know why that was put into effect," Mahoney said. "Three-dimensional broadcast images that people thought were real corpses—there was a stink about that five years ago. But those stiffs in your back yard aren't three-dis. They're real."

"Are?"

"Two were. One is. You're still on the spot. Well?"

Gallegher said, "I don't—" He stopped, his throat working. Abruptly, he stood up, eyes closed.

"Drink to me only with thine eyes, and I will pledge with mine," Gallegher sang, in a blasting tenor that, though untrained, rang true and resonant. *"Or leave a kiss within the cup—"*

"Hey!" Mahoney snapped, springing up. "Lay off. Hear me?"

"—and I'll not ask for wine! The thirst that from the soul doth rise—"

"Stop it!" the detective shouted. "We're not here to listen to you sing!"

Nevertheless, he listened. So did the others. Gallegher, caught in the grip of Señor Firez's wild talent, sang on and on, his unaccustomed throat gradually relaxing and pouring out the notes like the beak of a nightingale. Gallegher —sang!

They couldn't stop him. They fled, with threats. They would return later —with a strait jacket.

Grandpa also seemed caught in the throes of some strange affliction. Words poured out of him, strange semantic terms, mathematics translated into word-symbols, ranging from Euclid to Einstein and beyond. Grandpa, it seemed, had certainly acquired Gallegher's wild talent for math.

It came to an end, as all things, good or bad, inevitably do. Gallegher croaked hoarsely from a dry throat and, after a few feeble gasps, relapsed into silence. He collapsed on the couch, eying Grandpa, who was crumpled in a chair, wide-eyed. The three Lybblas had come out of hiding and stood in a row, each with a cookie clasped in furry paws.

"The world is mine," the fattest one said.

Events marched. Mahoney 'vised to say he was getting out a special injunction, and that Gallegher would be clapped into jail as soon as the machinery could be swung into action. Tomorrow, that meant.

Gallegher 'vised an attorney—the best one on the Eastern seaboard. Yes, Persson could quash the injunction, and certainly win the case, or—well, anyhow, Gallegher would have nothing to worry about if he retained the lawyer. The fee was payable partially in advance.

"How much? . . . *Uh!*"

"Call me," Persson said, "when you wish me to take charge. You may mail your check tonight."

"All right," Gallegher said, and hurriedly 'vised Rufus Hellwig. The tycoon, luckily, was in.

Gallegher explained. Hellwig was incredulous. He agreed, however, to be at the laboratory early the next morning for a test. He couldn't make it before then. Nor could he advance any money till matters had been proved beyond a doubt.

"Make me an excellent concert pianist," he said, "and I'll be convinced."

After that, Gallegher 'vised the teleview studio again, and managed to get in touch with Joey Mackenzie, the blond, beautiful pianist who had taken New York by storm recently and had instantly been signed by the telecompany. She said she'd be over in the morning. Gallegher had to talk her into it, but he dropped enough hints to rouse the girl's interest to fever pitch. She seemed to class science with black magic, and was fascinated by both.

She'd be there.

And another body appeared in the back yard, which meant probability-line *d* was taking over. No doubt the third corpse, at the same time, had vanished from the morgue. Gallegher almost felt sorry for Mahoney.

The wild talents settled down. Apparently the irresistible outburst came only at the beginning, some three hours or more after the initial treatment. After that, the ability could be turned on or off at will. Gallegher was no longer impelled to burst into song, but he found he could sing, and sing well, when he wished. Likewise Grandpa had a fine sense of mathematics when he chose to use it.

Finally, at five o'clock in the morning, Mahoney arrived with two officers, arrested Gallegher, and carried him off to jail.

He was incommunicado for three days.

Persson, the attorney, came on the evening of the third day armed with writs of *habeas corpus* and foul language. He sprang Gallegher, somehow—perhaps on his reputation. Later, in the air taxi, he threw up his hands and howled complaints.

"What kind of a case is this? Political pressure, legal tangles—it's crazy! Corpses appearing in your back yard—seven of them already—and vanishing from the morgue. What's behind it, Gallegher?"

"I'm not sure. You . . . uh . . . you're acting as my attorney?"

"Obviously." The taxi skimmed precariously past a skyscraper.

"The check—" Gallegher hazarded.

"Your grandfather gave it to me. Oh, he gave me a message, too. He said he'd treated Rufus Hellwig along the lines you'd suggested, and collected the fee. I can't feel that I've earned any part of my retainer yet, though. Letting you stay in jail for three days! But I was up against powerful political pull. Had to pull plenty of wires myself."

So that was it. Grandpa, of course, had acquired Gallegher's mathematical talent, and knew all about the mental hookup and how it worked. He'd treated Hellwig—successfully, it seemed. At least, they were in the chips now. But would that be enough?

Gallegher explained as much as he dared. Persson shook his head.

"The time machine's behind it, you say? Well, you've got to turn it off somehow. Stop those corpses from coming through."

"I can't even smash it," Gallegher confessed. "I tried, but it's in a state of stasis. Completely out of this temporal-spatial sector. I don't know how long that'll last. It's set to bring back my own corpse—and it'll keep doing that."

"So. All right. I'll do my best. Anyway, you're a free man now. But I can't guarantee anything unless you eliminate those incessant corpses of yours, Mr. Gallegher. I get out here. See you tomorrow. At my office, at noon? Good."

Gallegher shook hands and directed the cabman to his own place. An unpleasant surprise awaited him. It was Cantrell who opened the door.

The man's narrow, pale face twitched into a smile. "Evening," he said pleasantly, stepping back. "Come in, Gallegher."

"I am in. What are you doing here?"

"Visiting. Visiting your grandfather."

Gallegher glanced around the laboratory. "Where is he?"

"I dunno. See for yourself."

Sensing danger of some kind, the scientist began to search. He found Grandpa eating pretzels in the kitchen, and feeding the Lybblas. The old man evaded his gaze.

"O. K.," Gallegher said, "let's have it."

" 'Twasn't my fault. Cantrell said he'd turn over the heat ray to the police if I didn't do what he wanted. I knew that'd be your finish—"

"What's been happening?"

"Now take it easy. I got it all worked out. It can't do any harm—"

"What? *What?"*

"Cantrell's been making me use the machine on him," Grandpa confessed. "He peeked through the window when I treated Hellwig and figured out the answer. He threatened to get you convicted unless I gave him some extra talents."

"Whose?"

"Oh—Gulliver, Morleyson, Kottman, Denys, St. Malory—"

"That's enough," Gallegher said weakly. "The greatest technicians of the age, that's all! And their knowledge in Cantrell's brain! How did he wangle 'em into it?"

"Fast talking. He didn't let on what he wanted. Made up some cock-and-bull story— He got your mathematical talent, too. Through me."

"That's just fine," Gallegher said, looking grim. "What the devil is he up to?"

"He wants to conquer the world," the fattest Lybbla said sadly. "Oh, don't let him do it. We want to conquer the world."

"Not quite that," Grandpa said, "but bad enough. He's got the same knowledge we have now—enough to build another mental hookup. And he's taking the stratoliner to Europe in an hour."

"This means trouble," Gallegher said.

"Yeah, I know. I'm commencing to feel Cantrell's just a mite unscrupulous. He's the one responsible for your being kept in jail the last few days."

Cantrell opened the door and looked in. "There's a new corpse in the garden. It just appeared. We won't bother about it now, though. I'll be leaving shortly. Any word from Van Decker?"

"Van Decker!" Gallegher gulped. "You haven't got him—"

The man with the world's highest I. Q.!

"Not yet," Cantrell smiled. "I tried to get in touch with him for days, and he 'vised me only this morning. I was afraid I'd miss him. But he said he'd be over tonight." Cantrell glanced at his watch. "Hope he's on time. Stratoliners won't wait."

"Just a minute," Gallegher said, moving forward. "I'd like to know your plans, Cantrell."

"He's going to conquer the world!" one of the Lybblas piped.

Cantrell sent an amused look downward. "It's not too fantastic, at that," he admitted. "I'm completely amoral, luckily, so I can take full advantage of this opportunity. The talents of the world's greatest minds—they'll come in handy. I'll be a success in almost anything. I mean anything," he added, winking.

"Dictator complex," Grandpa scowled.

"Not yet," Cantrell told him. "Some day, maybe. Give me time. I'm pretty much of a superman already, you know."

Gallegher said, "You can't—"

"No? Don't forget I've got that heat ray of yours."

"Yeah," the scientist said, "and those corpses in the back yard—my own corpses—were all killed with a heat ray. You're the only guy who has one, so far. Apparently you're ticketed to kill me, eventually."

"Eventually's better than now, isn't it?" Cantrell asked softly.

Gallegher didn't answer. The other man went on.

"I've skimmed the cream from the best minds on the East coast, and now I'll do the same thing to Europe. Anything can happen."

One of the Lybblas began to cry bitterly, seeing his plan of world conquest shattered.

The doorbell sang. Grandpa, at Cantrell's nod, went out, to return with a squat, beak-nosed man wearing a bushy red beard. "Ha!" he bellowed. "I am here! Not late, I trust? Good."

"Dr. van Decker?"

"Who else?" the redbeard shouted. "Now hurry, hurry, hurry. I am a busy man. This experiment of yours; as you explained it on the 'visor, it will not work, but I am willing to try. Projecting one's astral is foolishness."

Grandpa nudged Gallegher. "Cantrell told him that was the idea," he muttered.

"Yeah? Listen, we can't—"

"Take it easy," Grandpa said, and one eye closed in a significant wink. "I got your talents now, son. I thought of the answer. See if you can. I used your math. *Sh-h-h!*"

There was no time for more. Cantrell shepherded them all into the laboratory. Gallegher, scowling and biting his lip, pondered the problem. He couldn't let Cantrell get away with this. But, on the other hand, Grandpa had said it was all right—that everything was under control.

The Lybblas, of course, had disappeared, probably in search of cookies. Cantrell, eying his watch, urged Van Decker into a chair. He kept one hand significantly on his pocket, and from time to time looked toward Gallegher. The ray gun was still around; its outline was visible beneath the flexocloth of Cantrell's coat.

"Show you how easy I can do it," Grandpa cackled, tottering on spindly legs toward the mental hookup device and throwing switches.

"Careful, Grandpa," Cantrell warned, his voice tight.

Van Decker stared. "Something is wrong?"

"No, no," Grandpa said. "Mr. Cantrell is afraid I will make a mistake. But no. This helmet—"

He fitted it on Van Decker's head. A stylus scratched wavering lines on graphs. Deftly Grandpa sheafed them together, fell over his own feet and collapsed, the cards flying far and wide. Before Cantrell could move the old man was up again, muttering oaths as he collected the charts.

He laid them on a table. Gallegher moved forward, peering over Cantrell's shoulder. *Whew!* This was the real thing, all right. Van Decker's I. Q. was tremendous. His wild talents were—well, wildly remarkable.

Cantrell—who also knew the details of the mental hookup now, since he had absorbed Gallegher's mathematical ability via Grandpa—nodded with satisfaction. He fitted a helmet on his own head and moved toward the device. With a cursory glance at Van Decker to see that all was

well, he threw the switches. Lights blazed; the humming rose to a scream. And died.

Cantrell removed the helmet. As he reached into his pocket, Grandpa lifted a casual hand and showed a small, gleaming pistol.

"Don't do it," Grandpa said.

Cantrell's eyes narrowed. "Drop that gun."

"Nope. I figured you'd want to kill us and smash the machine, so you'd stay unique. It won't work. This gun's got a hair trigger. You can burn a hole in me, Cantrell, but you'll be dead while you're doing it."

Cantrell considered. "Well?"

"Get out. I don't want to be burned down, any more than you want a bullet in your stomach. Live and let live. Beat it."

Cantrell laughed softly. "Fair enough, Grandpa. You've earned it. Don't forget, I still know how to build the machine. And—I've skimmed the cream. You can do the same thing, but not any better than I can."

"So it's even," Grandpa said.

"Yes, it's even. We'll meet again. Don't forget what killed those corpses in your yard, Gallegher," Cantrell said, and backed out of the door, smiling tightly.

Gallegher came to life with a jump. "We've got to 'vise the police!" he snapped. "Cantrell's too dangerous now to let loose."

"Take it easy," Grandpa cautioned, waving the gun. "I told you it was all fixed up. You don't want to be convicted for murder, do you? If Cantrell's arrested—and we couldn't make a charge stick, anyway—the police would find the heat-ray projector. This way's better."

"What way?" Gallegher demanded.

"O. K., Mickey," Grandpa said, grinning at Dr. Simon van Decker, who took off his red beard and wig and started to laugh joyously.

Gallegher's jaw dropped. "A ringer!" he gasped.

"Sure. I 'vised Mickey privately a few days ago. Told him what I wanted. He dressed up, 'vised Cantrell, and pretended to be Van Decker. Made an appointment for tonight."

"But the charts. They showed a genius I. Q.—"

"I switched charts when I dropped 'em on the floor," Grandpa confessed. "I'd made up some fakes in advance."

Gallegher scowled. "That doesn't alter the situation, though. Cantrell's still loose, and with too damn much knowledge."

"Hold your horses, young fellow," Grandpa said. "Wait'll I explain."

He explained.

About three hours later the the telecast news came through: a man named Roland Cantrell had fallen to his death from the Atlantic stratoliner.

Gallegher, however, knew the exact moment of Cantrell's death. For the corpse in the back yard had vanished at that time.

Because, with the heat-ray projector destroyed, Gallegher's future no longer could involve his death through a heat beam. Unless he made another, which he would take care not to do.

The time machine came out of its stasis and returned to normal. Gallegher guessed why. It had been set to fulfill a definite pattern—involving the death of Gallegher according to a certain set of variables. Within the limits of those variables, it was frozen. It could not stop operating till it had exhausted all the possibilities. As long as any of Gallegher's probable futures held heat-ray death—corpses would appear.

Now the future was altered drastically. No longer did it involve *a, b, c,* et cetera. The heat ray—the prime factor of the equation—was destroyed in the present. So Gallegher's probable futures now involved a-1, b-1, c-1, et cetera.

And the machine wasn't set for such radical variations. It had fulfilled the task for which it had been set. Now it awaited new orders.

But Gallegher studied it thoroughly before using it again.

He had plenty of time. Without a single *corpus delicti,* Persson had no difficulty in getting the case quashed, though the unfortunate Mahoney nearly went mad trying to figure out what had happened. As for the Lybblas—

Gallegher absently passed around the cookies, wondering how he could get rid of the small, stupid creatures without hurting their feelings. "You don't want to stay here all your lives, do you?" he inquired.

"Well, no," one of them replied, brushing crumbs from his whiskers with a furry paw. "But we gotta conquer the Earth," he pointed out plaintively.

"Mm-m-m," Gallegher said. And went out to make a purchase, returning later with some apparatus he surreptitiously attached to the televisor.

Shortly thereafter, the regular telecast was broken off for what purported to be a news flash. By a curious coincidence, the three Lybblas were watching the 'visor at the time. The scene on the screen faded into a close-up of the newscaster, whose face was almost entirely concealed by the sheaf of papers he held. From the eyebrows up—the only part visible—he looked much like Gallegher, but the Lybblas were too intrigued to notice.

"Flash!" said the 'visor excitedly. "Important bulletin! For some time the world has known of the presence of three distinguished visitors from Mars. They have—"

The Lybblas exchanged startled glances. One of them started to pipe a question and was hastily shushed. They listened again.

"They had been planning to conquer the Earth, it has been learned, and we are pleased to report that the world's entire population has gone over to the side of the Lybblas. A bloodless revolution has taken place. The Lybblas are unanimously acclaimed as our sole rulers—"

"Whee!" cried a small voice.

—"and the new form of government is already being set up. There will be a different fiscal system, and coins bearing the heads of the Lybblas are being minted. It is expected that the three rulers will shortly return to Mars to explain the situation to their friends there."

The newscaster's partially exposed face vanished from the screen, and the regular telecast resumed. After a while Gallegher appeared, smiling secretively. He was greeted with shrill shouts from the Lybblas.

"We gotta go home now. It was a bloodless—"

"Revolution! The world is ours!"

Their optimism was surpassed only by their credulity. Gallegher allowed himself to be convinced that the Lybblas must go back to Mars.

"O. K.," Gallegher agreed. "The machine's all ready. One last cookie all around, and then off you go."

He shook each fuzzy paw, bowed politely, and the three Lybblas, ears bobbing, piping excitedly among themselves, were shot back to Mars, five hundred years in the future. They were anxious to return to their friends and relate their adventures. They did—but nobody ever believed them.

There were no repercussions from Cantrell's death, though Gallegher, Grandpa and Mickey waited rather worriedly for several days before they felt able to relax. After that, Grandpa and Gallegher went on a terrific binge and felt far better.

Mickey couldn't join them. Regretfully, he returned to the circus lot, where, twice a day, he capitalized on his peculiar talents by diving from the top of a thirty-foot ladder into a tub filled with water—

THE END.

Pelagic Spark

by Anthony Boucher

A man—one Mr. de Camp, of whom you may have heard—wrote an article ridiculing prophets. Another man lied, to deceive the enemy. And—de Camp, by magnificent confusion, became what he ridiculed: a prophet!

Illustrated by Kolliker

A. D. 1942:

Lieutenant L. Sprague de Camp, U. S. N. R., thumped the table and chuckled. "That will settle the Nostradamians!"

His pretty blond wife made remarks about waking babies and then asked what on earth he meant.

"The prophecy fakers," he said. "McCann and Robb and Boucher and the others who are all agog and atwitter over Michele de Notredame and his supposed forecasts of our world troubles. Prophecy in Mike's manner is too damned easy. If you're obscure and symbolic and cryptic enough, whatever happens is bound to fit in some place with your prophecy. Take the most famous of all Nostradamic quatrains, that one about Henri II—"

His wife said, yes, she had heard several times already about how that could be made to fit the de Camp family just as well as the French royal house, and what was the new idea?

"Every man his own Nostradamus, that's my motto," he went on. "I am, personally, every bit as much a prophet as Mike ever was. And I'm going to prove it. I've just thought of the perfect tag for my debunking article."

His wife looked expectant.

"I'm going to close with an original de Camp prophecy, which will make just as much sense as any of Mike's, with a damned sight better meter and grammar. Listen:

"Pelagic young spark of the East
Shall plot to subvert the Blue Beast,
  But he'll dangle on high
  When the Ram's in the sky,
And the Cat shall throw dice at the feast!

"You like?"

His wife said it was a limerick, of all things, and what did it mean?

"Why not a limerick? That's the great verse form of American folk rhyme—a natural for an American prophecy. And as to what it means, how do I know? Did Mike know what he meant when he wrote 'Near to Rion and next to white wool, Aries, Taurus, Cancer, Leo, the Virgin'?

"But this I swear to: If this article sells and de Camp's Prophetic Limerick is there in print for future McCanns to study, by 2342 it will have been fulfilled as surely as any quatrain Mike ever wrote, or I lose all trust in the perverted ingenuity of the human race."

A. D. 1943:

By the time the magazine reached Sergeant Harold Marks, there was not much left in it to interest him. The Varga girls and the Hurrell photographs had gone to decorate the walls of long-abandoned outposts, and most of the cartoons had vanished, too. Little remained but text and ads, and Sergeant Marks was not profoundly concerned with what the well-dressed man in America was wearing last Christmas.

Until he had almost finished looking through it, he would have been more than willing to swap the magazine for a cigarette or even for a drag on one, but at the end he hit the de Camp article.

The sergeant's sister Madeleine was psychic. At least, that was her persistent claim, and up until she joined the WAACs nobody had been able to persuade her otherwise. Sergeant Marks had no later news from his sister than the discomforting word that she had received her commission and now outranked him, but he was willing to bet that she still spent as much time as she could spare telling her unfortunate noncoms about the wonders of Nostradamus.

It was good to see somebody tear into the prophecy racket and rip it apart. This de Camp seemed a right guy, and his lucid attack did Sergeant Marks' heart good.

Especially the prophetic limerick. The sergeant was something of an authority on limericks. He had yet to find a man in the service whose collection topped his. But the pelagic young spark from the East tickled him even more than the unlikely offspring of the old man of Bombay or the peculiar practices of the clergy of Birmingham.

Sergeant Marks carefully tore the limerick out of the magazine and slipped it in his pocket. He'd copy it out in a V-letter to Madeleine when they managed to get in touch again.

He thumbed back over the magazine, hoping that he might have overlooked some piece of cheesecake that had escaped previous vandals. Then without warning, all hell broke loose from the jungle and Sergeant Marks forgot cheesecake and prophecy alike.

Civilian Harold Marks used to scoff at stories of heroes who captured machine-gun nests single-handed. That was before he joined the Marines and learned that practical heroism is not a mythical matter.

He still didn't know how it was done. He knew only, and that with a half-aware negligence, that he had done it. He was in the jungle, master of a green-painted machine gun, and he was alone save for a pile of unmoving things with green uniforms and yellow faces.

There were more of them coming. A green gun looks funny in your hands, but it works fine.

There were no more coming.

Toting the green killer, Sergeant Marks returned to the ambushed outpost. His throat choked when he recognized Corporal Witchett by his hairy palms. There was no face to recognize him by.

There had been few enough men here. Now there seemed to be only one. The ambush had been destroyed, but at a cost that—

Sergeant Marks hurried to where he heard the groan. He knelt down by the lieutenant and tried to catch his faint words.

"Reinforcements . . . tomorrow . . . try . . . hold on . . . up to you, Marks."

"I will, sir," the sergeant grinned, "unless they outnumber me. They might send *two* detachments."

The lieutenant smiled dimly. "Saw you . . . nest . . . fine work, Marks . . . see you get medal for—"

"Swell custom, posthumous medals," said Sergeant Marks.

A look of concern came into the officer's too sharply high-lighted eyes. "Sergeant . . . you're wounded—"

Marks looked down at his blood-blackened shirt and his eyes opened in amazement. Then the jungle began to jive to a solid boogie and his eyes closed for a long time.

When they opened again, he saw a hospital ward and muttered warm prayerful oaths of relief. So the reinforcements had showed up before another Jap detachment. He hoped the lieutenant had held out. And what the hell had happened to Boszkowicz and Corvetti and—

Funny, having Chinese nurses. Nightingales from the Celestial Kingdom. All the other patients Chinese, too. Funny. And yet they didn't look quite—

When the doctor came, there was no doubt of the situation. The teeth and the mustache and the glasses, the standard cartoon set-up. But not comical. And certainly not Chinese.

Sergeant Marks heard a strange croaking that must have been his own voice demanding to know what went on and since when did American Marines rate a pampered convalescence in a Jap hospital? He felt almost ashamed of himself. There seemed to be something like an involuntary Quislingism in enjoying these Nipponese benefits instead of sprawling dead in the jungle.

The doctor made a grin and noises and went away. He came back ushering in two men in uniform. The older one was a fierce little man with a chestful of medals. The other was young and jaunty and said, "Hi! What's clean, Marine?"

Sergeant Marks said, "What am I doing here? Don't tell me you boys are starting a home for disabled veterans?"

"Just for you, sergeant. You're teacher's pet."

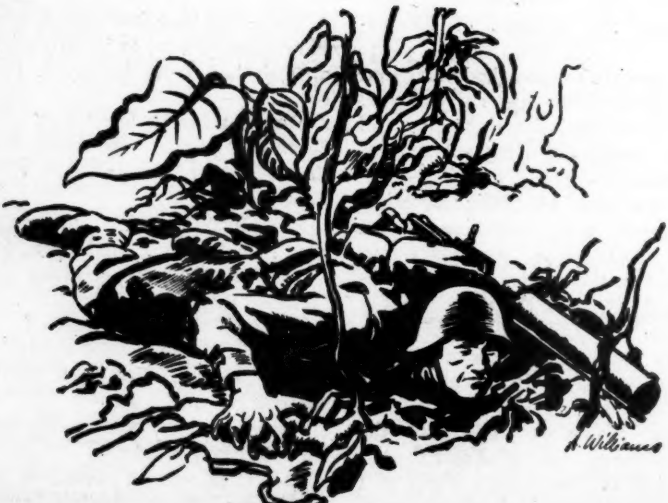
"Tell teacher I'll send him a nice shiny pineapple first chance I get."

The little man with the medals asked a question, and the youth answered.

Marks grinned. "I'll bet teacher won't give you an A on that translation. You the only one here speaks English?"

"English hell," said the interpreter. "I talk American."

"O. K., you hind end of a Trojan horse. Why am I here? What's the



picture? Shoot the photo to me, Moto."

The officer went off again, and not in a pleasant mood.

"We'll have cross-fire gags some other time, sergeant," the interpreter said. "Right now the colonel wants to know what this is." He handed over a bloodstained piece of paper.

Sergeant Marks' brain did nip-ups. He got the picture now, all in a flash. Somebody had found this clipping on his unconscious body, failed to interpret it, and decided it was some momentous secret inscription. He'd been nursed back to consciousness especially so that it could interpret it. And if he told the truth—

He could see in advance the dumb disbelief of his enemies. He could foresee the cool ingenuity with which they would try to wrest further statements from him. He could—

He opened his mouth and heard inspired words coming out in the voice which he was beginning to accept as his. "Oh, that? Well, I'll tell you. I'm very grateful for what you've done for me, and in return— That's our secret prophecy."

"Nuts," said the interpreter.

"I'm serious," said Sergeant Marks, and managed to look and sound so. "You didn't know that Roosevelt had his private astrologer, did you? Just like Hirohito and Hitler. We've kept it pretty secret. But this is the masterpiece of Astro the Great. We don't know what it means, but all have to carry it so we can take advantage of it if it begins to come true. We're supposed to swallow it if dying or captured; I'm afraid I slipped up there."

The interpreter said, "Do you expect me to feed the colonel a line of tripe like that?"

"But it's true. I'm just trying to save myself. I—"

The fierce little colonel burst into another tirade. The interpreter answered protestingly. The colonel insisted.

Then the nurse who had been making the next bed turned around and addressed a long speech to the colonel. Slowly his fierceness faded into a sort of mystical exaltation. He replied excitedly to the nurse, and added one short sentence to the interpreter.

As the three men left the room, the interpreter spat one epithet at Marks.

"Why, Moto!" the sergeant grinned. "Where *did* you learn that word?"

"I know rittre Engrish," the nurse explained proudly. "When interpreter won't talk, I say to kerner your story. Kerner very much preased. He send prophecy now to emperor. Emperor's star-men, they study it."

"Thanks, baby. Nice work. And what happens to my pal Peter Lorre for refusing to translate?"

"Him? Oh, they shoot him same time as you."

One less Jap, one less Marine—"Well"—Sergeant Marks forced a grin—"we're holding our own."

A. D. 1945:

The Imperial courier asked, "Has astrologer-san any prophetic discoveries that I may report today to the Son of Heaven?"

The court astrologer said, "Indeed I have, and though the word of the stars seems black to us, yet will the rays of the Rising Sun dispel that blackness. Adolf Hitler will die today. The Yankees and the British will conclude a separate peace with Germany and will concentrate their attacks upon the Greater East Asia Prosperity Sphere."

The courier smiled. "So astrologer-san also possesses a short-wave radio? Adolf Hitler has died today. The rest of your prophecy is, of course, a clever deduction from the rise of the White American party and a knowledge of the shrewdness of the German military aristocracy. But I shall report it as prophecy to the Son of Heaven. And has astrologer-san yet deciphered the American prophecy?"

"It is difficult. The court will understand that the complexities of the per-verse American methods of magical calculation—"

"The Son of Heaven will understand that he needs a new astrologer, and that old astrologers know too much to remain alive." He smiled again.

The court astrologer used the same ritual dagger as his thirteen predecessors since Sergeant Marks' death.

A. D. 1951:

Adolf Hitler had reason to feel pleased with himself. His carefully faked death had deluded the United Nations into a sense of false security and enabled Germany to conclude an armistice and obtain a much-needed breathing spell. When her enemies were engaged in the final struggle in the East, it had been easy to overthrow the necessarily small army of occupation and hasten to the rescue of Japan.

Destroying Japan in the inevitable German-Japanese war that followed their joint victory had not been so easy. It had not been possible to fool the Japanese with organizations like the White American party or the British Empire League.

But it had been accomplished, and now Adolf Hitler, secure at last and already beginning to find security uncomfortable, was free to devote himself to such pleasing minor problems as the exquisitely painted tablet before him.

"I found it myself, mein Führer," explained Reinhardt Heydrich, now resurrected from that earlier fake death which had served as a test of Anglo-Saxon credulity. "It was in a hidden inner shrine in an obscure temple in Tokyo. No one has seen it save my late interpreter. I cannot understand how what is obviously a prophecy in a Japanese shrine comes to be written in English; there is doubtless some symbolic significance. The Japanese characters at the top read 'American prophecy.' The rough translation runs—"

He paraphrased the limerick.

Adolf Hitler listened, nodding slowly, and a mystical film spread over his eyes. It was as though he were listening to music.

When he spoke at last, he said: "We hold the world too securely for any more great events to happen in our days. We shall not see the fulfillment of this prophecy. But treasure it carefully. It shall be invaluable to one of my successors, even as Nostradamus was to me. For did he not write: 'The Holy Empire will come to Germany,' and again 'Near the Rhine of the Noric Alps a Great One will be born'?"

157 N. H. (A. D. 2045):

Captain Felix Schweinspitzen mopped tropical sweat from his Nordic brow and moaned, "Hang it, Anton, I was born at the wrong time."

Anton Metzger looked up from the meaningless series of letters which he had been jotting down. "We're all born into a pattern, Felix. We can't make the design ourselves."

"Not now, no. That's just what I mean. There have been times when we could. Look at Napoleon or the first Hitler. They made their own designs. And I keep feeling that in the right world I could, too. I can lead men. That's demonstrated fact. Look what I've done with the natives here in Java."

"Too much maybe. I wouldn't be surprised if the Führer was a little jealous on his inspection visit."

"I can lead men. I could lead the men of the world—I feel it, I know it. But what chance have I? While he rules by virtue of the organization and the rules of succession and—"

"Would you want his job in view of all we've been hearing of the Tyrannicides?"

Captain Schweinspitzen laughed. "We destroyed Canada and America almost a century ago. What have we to fear from a little handful of desperate men?"

"Little handfuls of desperate men did great things in the death struggles of those nations. I remember my grandfather telling stories of demons called

Commandos and Rangers."

"The Tyrannicides are futile. Tyrant killers indeed, when all they've accomplished so far is the death of a couple of subordinates no more important than you, Anton. Now if someone were to attempt the life of Hitler XVI himself— What are you working on there?"

Metzger smiled. "The American prophecy."

"Wotan! Why waste your time with foolish—"

"The job of being your interpreter in Dutch and Javanese is hardly an all-absorbing one, Felix. I have to have some interest. And I got a very curious lead today. I heard some natives talking about the coming inspection visit. And you know what they call the Führer?"

"No."

"They've been seeing photochromes of him in those powder-blue uniforms he's so devoted to. And they call him the Blue Beast."

Captain Schweinspitzen tore off a string of oaths. "The subversive traitors! They can't talk that way about him. I'll have them— Give me their names."

"I'm afraid I don't remember who they were. And is this precisely a consistent attitude when you were just speaking of his assassination?"

"That's different. I'm as Aryan as he is. But these natives— Oh, well. How does that traitorous nickname help you?"

"The Blue Beast is one of the personages in the prophecy. They've been speculating for a hundred years on his identity. Now there's a clue, and if I can figure out the rest—"

"How does the whole thing go?" the captain asked idly.

Metzger recited it:

"Pelagic young spark of the East
Shall plot to subvert the Blue Beast,
  But he'll dangle on high
  When the Ram's in the sky,
And the Cat shall throw dice at the feast!"

The captain nodded. "The English I picked up when I was Gauleiter in Des Moines seems to be good enough to handle that. Only what does *pelagic* mean?"

"That's the word that bothers me. It means 'oceanic.' Now 'oceanic young spark' doesn't make any obvious sense—if anything, it's a contradiction in terms. But it makes just as good meter as 'pelagic,' so why was the exceedingly uncommon word used instead of the obvious one? That's why I'm hunting for an anagram in it. I've been rearranging letters and I can't get anything better than—" His voice stopped dead. He stared at the captain, at his paper, and back at the captain.

"Well!" Captain Schweinspitzen barked. "What is it?"

"The best I can get," Metzger repeated, "is 'pig lace.' "

"Yes?"

"And 'pig lace,' captain, means 'Schweinspitzen.' "

The officer stared. The interpreter went on hastily, as details clicked into formation: "You are of the East, have been here in Java for years. You were a telecast operator once, weren't you? Well, 'spark'—or was it 'sparks'?—meant a wireless operator in twentieth century American dialect. 'Pelagic young spark of the East—' "

" '—shall plot to subvert the Blue Beast';" the captain continued the quotation. "In other words, Schweinspitzen, the ex-telecaster of Java, shall plot to subvert Hitler XVI." He smiled craftily to himself. "Well, Anton, we are all part of a design, aren't we? We can't very well refuse to fulfill the prophecy, can we?"

Lyman Harding wrung out his dripping garments. You didn't need clothes anyway, here in the damp heat of the jungle. But they'd need these clothes later; they were of bullet-deflecting soteron, and stealing that textile from the closely guarded plastic factory had been the most perilous step in the plot—so far.

"The natives are with us," Girdy reported to him. "They hate him and his rule over them. Call him the Blue Beast."

"If only we had planes—" Harding sighed. "Think how directly we could act instead of this swimming in from a mile offshore and lurking in jungles and—"

"We'll have planes soon enough," Girdy said confidently.

"If it all comes off according to schedule. If our other men all over the world manage to dispose of his followers according to the rule of succession. Then there'll be complete chaos in the

Party, and those who still love freedom can strike."

"But ours is the biggest job." Girdy's wide ugly face was alight with pride. "When we knock off the Hitler himself— Only have you figured yet how we can crash this inspection reception?"

"I've got a rough plan—" Lyman Harding began.

Anton Metzger did not like the changes that were evident in Captain Schweinspitzen after that momentous discussion of the American prophecy.

The captain had previously seemed unusually intelligent and unusually human for the post which he held. Oh, he was given to ranting about his stifled abilities as a leader of men, but he was a friend and companion. He understood the arts, even in their neglected or forbidden aspects, and he understood people, even tolerating Metzger when he talked in a tone that did not jibe perfectly with the tenets of the Aryan World State.

For Metzger felt his Austrian blood more keenly than his Prussian. He was a useful servant of Hitler XVI chiefly because he had been reared in the AWS and never known directly any other concepts of life. But he knew himself for a misfit and groped faintly toward something else.

He had sometimes in the past sensed a similar groping in Captain Schweinspitzen, but no more. Not since the captain had become convinced of his identity with the pelagic young spark. Now, when he saw his dream of leadership approaching fulfillment, humanity dropped away from him like an outworn robe, and the naked body beneath it was strong and beautiful and cruel and masterful.

Metzger learned little of his plot to subvert the Blue Beast. The captain retained enough of his understanding of people to know that Metzger might want the destruction of Hitler XVI, but certainly not the instating of Felix Schweinspitzen as a new and greater Hitler.

Metzger gathered only the fringes of the plot, only enough to know that the crucial moment would come at the reception and State banquet which would be the ritual high point of the inspection tour.

And then he inadvertently contributed the key element to the pelagic plot. This came about on the day that he entered the office just in time to see the captain put a bullet coolly through the forehead of a man in the blue uniform of a personal messenger of the Führer.

Schweinspitzen showed no embarrassment at the presence of a witness. He said coldly, "He brought me bad news. This is how the great leaders of old have always rewarded such messengers."

Metzger realized now how fully the madness of leadership had come to possess the man who had once been almost his friend. Quietly he said, "What news, Felix?"

"You said that the Blue Beast might be jealous of my success here. You're a prophet yourself, Anton. He is. He has forbidden my presence at the banquet."

Metzger felt something like relief. "It's better this way, Felix. Such an attempt as you've been plotting is too dangerous. And if you must be guided by the American prophecy, remember its middle couplet:

"But he'll dangle on high
When the Ram's in the sky.

"The State hasn't executed a man by hanging for a hundred years, but the Hitler might very well reinstate the archaic punishment for a great traitor."

"Am I afraid of your prophecy? Don't be a fool." But he looked perplexed and reflective for a moment. Then he snapped his fingers. "What are the names of those two paratransport planes we use for the outlying islands?"

"The *Aries* and the *Leo.*"

Captain Schweinspitzen laughed. "Very well, my dear Anton. Be sure to attend the feast. You'll see me dangling on high all right. And what is the last line of your prophecy?"

" 'And the Cat shall throw dice at the feast.' "

"Throw dice? Mete out justice by lot, it might mean. That will do. And the Cat— I picked up bits of American folklore in Des Moines, Anton. See if that clue enables you to decipher your prophecy."

Felix Schweinspitzen had left the office before Anton Metzger placed the apposite bit of American folklore. Then at last he recalled the comic black figure in twentieth-century cartoons. Felix the Cat—

Metzger saw little more of the captain during the remaining few days before the banquet. Five natives were executed for the murder of the Führer's messenger and possible leaderly wrath was averted.

But Captain Schweinspitzen not only accepted the banishment from the banquet, he refused even to appear at the reception and tour, and Metzger found himself as official guide and escort to the sixteenth Hitler.

"It is dull here," the Führer protested. "Buildings of common steel and stone—no glass, no plastic. The telephone used almost exclusively without a visoscreen. Not a stereoscopic theater on the island. Old model automobiles and no moving walks . . . why, one might as well be back in the twentieth century."

"The Führer knows," Metzger explained, "why this is so. This island exists solely so that a slave population may produce raw materials for the State. There is no need for any of the refinements of civilization here; we lead the crude life of pioneers."

"It is dull," Hitler XVI repeated with a yawn.

He was littler and plumper than his pictures indicated. There was the infinite refinement of boredom on the round bland face. Nothing of the captain's dream of leadership here, nothing of whatever the magnetic power was which brought about the success of the man from whom the Aryan World State's Führers took their title of Hitler.

That title descended now in fixed ranks of party precedence, and skill in party politics is not the sole prerequisite of the leader. Metzger thought of the decadence of the later Roman emperors. There was sense in Schweinspitzen's notion of replacing this worn-out quasi-leader with the vigor of the real thing.

But was the leader-principle in itself humanly justifiable? Metzger was often glad that among the many refinements of civilization missing on the island were psychometrists; he hated to think what might happen if one of the skilled ones at home were to psych him and discover these hidden doubts.

The banquet was held out-of-doors in the warmth of a tropic night, and even outdoors it was evident that Hitler XVI found the vanity of his powder-blue uniform uncomfortably warm.

The first course, as was the traditional ritual at all formal State banquets, was an unpalatable and nameless ersatz, to remind men of what their forebears had suffered in order to establish the Aryan World State. Then followed a magnificent *rijstaafel,* that noble fusion of unnumbered courses which was the sole survival of the one-time Dutch culture of the island.

With the *rijstaafel* Hitler XVI for the first time displayed an enthusiastic interest in his colonial outpost. He tucked it away prodigiously, with pious ejaculations of praise, while Anton Metzger hardly bothered to conceal his smile of quiet contempt.

Seeing and guiding the Führer had at last fully brought home to Metzger the loss of human dignity brought about by the Aryan World State. That man should submit to the totalitarian rule of this stupid and decadent dynasty was unthinkable—and equally unthinkable that man should tolerate the institution of just such another rule even under the fresh and vigorous aegis of a Captain Felix Schweinspitzen. Only with what the captain had called the little handfuls of desperate men lay the hope of the future. If Metzger could ever somehow establish contact with one of those handfuls—

Tyrannicide Lyman Harding set the curried chicken in front of the voracious Hitler XVI. A pinch of native poison in the chicken could have turned the trick in safety; but the tyrant needed a more open and sensational removal to arouse the world.

The carefully applied body stain made him and his fellow Tyrannicides indistinguishable from the native servants to the casual glance; and what proudly self-confident Aryan would bestow more than a casual glance on his colored slaves? But he could not quite attain the unobtrusive skilled movements of the natives. There was an American angularity to his serving, and once he was so awkward as to spill a drop of hot sauce on the neck of one of the Führer's aids.

For a moment he feared that his slip was the end of the adventure. The aid's hand rested on his automatic. Harding thought of the many stories of slaves butchered in cold blood for even less grievous offenses. But the officer finally let out a snarling laugh and said something indubitably insulting in German. Then he picked up the outsize glass of brandy that he had been swilling with his food and hurled it in the servant's face.

Harding's eyes stung with the pain of the alcohol. He bowed servilely and scurried off. The next course was the shoat stewed in coconut milk, and with that course—

Anton Metzger heard the motors of a plane passing over the open-air banquet. The Führer did not look up from his gorging. Why should he? Strict care was always taken to enforce the regulation that no armed planes could be aloft during his tour of inspection.

This could only be an unarmed transport, Metzger thought, though he wondered why it seemed to be slowing down and circling overhead. It must be the *Leo* or the *Aries*—

The *Aries!* Aries, the Ram! The prophecy—

Suddenly Anton Metzger understood the subversive plot of the pelagic young spark, Captain Schweinspitzen.

Lyman Harding checked with his eye the position of his fellows and of the natives that were helping them. All O. K. On his silver tray lay the knife—the knife that looked like any serving knife which any servant might carry. Only the keenest eye could tell the excellence of its steel or the fineness of its whetted edge.

He took a bowl of shoat from the tray and set it before an Aryan diner. Then as he looked down at the polished silver, he saw his face mirrored in the space left by that bowl. And his face was recognizably white.

The alcohol in that contemptuously thrown brandy had attacked his skin stain. So far the diners were too absorbed in the *rijstaafel* to have noticed him. But that luck could not last. He was in the middle of the tables now. It would take him at least a minute to work his way either to the Hitler's table or to the protective outer darkness. A minute. Sixty seconds, in every one of which he took the almost certain chance of being recognized for a spy, of being killed—which is not an agreeable thought even to the most venturesome—and—what was far worse—of seeing his whole plan collapse.

The success of the blows planned for today all over the world depended on the success of this venture here in destroying Hitler XVI. And the success of this venture depended absolutely on him, since each man had his duty and his was the prime one of disposing of the Führer.

The transport motor droned over the clatter of the banquet. Harding made his decision. The risks were the same whether he attempted to reach concealment or went on with his plan. He advanced toward the Hitler's table, serving out the bowls of stewed shoat as he went.

A colonel raised his eyes from his plate to call for more wine. His eyes met the white face of a brown-bodied servant. He opened his mouth.

And at that moment a half dozen shouts went up from as many tables. Men were standing and pointing up. The colonel forgot even that astonishing servant as he raised his eyes to the sky and saw the dim shapes floating down.

The blue-black parachutes were all but invisible—perceptible only as vague shapes blotting out the stars, slowly descending with the deadly quiet of doom.

There was a shrill scream of terror, though there were no women in the gathering. There were barking shots from the officers' sidearms, answered from above—futilely, at that distance and under those conditions of fire.

Then the rattle of the machine guns began.

Anton Metzger tore his eyes from what he knew must be Schweinspitzen, dangling on high while the "Ram's in the sky," and looked at the plump face of Hitler XVI, still aquiver from that terrified scream. Then he saw the unbelievable sight of a native with a gleaming knife charging at the Führer's table.

The others at the table were staring and firing aloft. Only Hitler XVI, stirred by some warning of personal danger, and Metzger saw the servant's attack. Metzger's first thought was the stories of amuck. Then he saw the white face, and understood the truth even before he heard the half-legendary cry of the Tyrannicides: "Sick the tyrants!"

Hitler XVI had drawn his automatic. He handled it with the awkwardness of a man little accustomed to firearms, but he could hardly miss the large target charging at him.

For the first time in his malcontent life, Anton Metzger became a man of action. The action was simple. It consisted in seizing the Führer's arm from behind and twisting it till the automatic fell, then in holding both arms pinioned while the knife carved into the plump flesh of the Führer's throat.

The three-way battle had been furious and bloody, but its outcome was never in doubt. Schweinspitzen's paratroops were rashly too few to achieve anything. The Hitler's men might have put up a successful resistance by themselves even after their Führer's death, but the disconcerting presence of two sets of enemies, one in their own uniforms, unmanned them. The Tyrannicides and the natives had won a total victory in the triangular confusion.

Now Metzger stood with Lyman Harding and surveyed the carnage. "I owe you my life," Harding said. "The soteron garments I'd planned on for protection couldn't be used with this servant-disguise scheme, and there was no other way of getting in. And the world owes you a hell of a lot more than I do."

"I owe you," Metzer said in English, "more than I could ever explain."

"But look. Maybe you can tell me something. What went on with those paratroops? They came just at the perfect time for a cover for us and I don't know as we'd have made it without them; but who were they?"

"They were an attempt at a palace revolution, led by one Captain Schweinspitzen." Metzger kept his eyes from the crumpled heap of blue-black cloth that covered the body of his one-time friend Felix. A machine gun had reached in the air and he had indeed dangled on high, a parachuting corpse.

"But it was crazy. He didn't have a

chance to get away with that attack. Why did he—"

"He believed that it had been prophesied. I'm afraid it's partly my own fault for being overingenious in my interpretations. You see—" And Metzger explained about the American prophecy. "So," he concluded, "the prophecy did come true in detail, all save the last line. And it was fulfilled *because* it existed. Without that prophecy, Schweinspitzen would never have conceived such a plot."

Harding was laughing, a titanic Bunyanesque laugh that seemed disproportionate even to the paradox of the prophecy or to the nervous release following the bloody victory.

"It is a curious paradox," Metzger said. "I wonder if that is the only true way in which prophecy can function, by bringing about its own fulfillment. I wonder if the author of that prophecy—"

Harding managed to stop laughing and had to wipe his eyes. "That's just it," he gasped. "The author of the prophecy. You see, friend, he was my own great-grandpappy."

"What?"

"Fact. I know that prophecy. The family managed to save some of Great-grandfather de Camp's stuff—he was a writer—from the great book-burnings and it's sort of a tradition that all of us should read it. Swell screwy stuff it is, too. But I remember the prophecy, and it's all a gag."

"A gag?"

"A joke. A hoax. Great-grandpappy wrote an article to disprove prophecy, and made his point by writing a limerick of pure nonsense so vague and cryptic that it'd be bound to be twisted into prophetic frame sometime in the course of history. And instead it's made history. In fact, it's saved history. Gosh, would this slay the old man!"

"Pure nonsense," Metzger mused, "and fulfilled in every detailed word, except for the last line." Suddenly he said, "Tyrannicides! Is that just what people call you or what you really call yourselves?"

"Well, we mostly call us the Tyros, just for the hell of it. But the full name is Canadian-American Tyrannicides—sometimes just the initials—Oh!"

Comprehension lit his face as he followed Metzger's eyes. In the shambles of the banquet a couple of his boys had started a crap game.

The C. A. T. were throwing dice at the feast.

Lyman Harding whistled. "Great-grandpappy didn't know his own strength."

NOTE: The de Camp "prophecy" is an actual one; see *Esquire*, December, 1942. The lines quoted from Nostradamus are, of course, also actual; those cited by Hitler are from the Nazi propaganda pamphlet, "Nostradamus Prophecies About The War," by Norab.

THE END.

"THAT'S FOR ME FOR ENERGY"
BETTER TASTE...
PEPSI-COLA
BIGGER DRINK

Competition

by E. M. Hull

Artur Blord had a very delicate situation on his hands. His enemies didn't really hate him; they just distrusted his abilities, and thought sudden death and public ridicule would make a good cure. They forced a deal from him—they thought.

Illustrated by Orban

The four men in the idling plane sat quiet now, watching.

The debarkation of the space freighter from Earth was in full swing. People were packing out onto the landing platforms, carrying suitcases. One of the men in the airabout sneered:

"These immigrant freighters certainly pack them in."

The big man said, "That's why they call them freighters; they handle human cargoes—"

"Look, Mr. Delaney," a third man cut in excitedly. "There's a girl, a screamer if I ever saw one."

The big man was silent; his sleet-gray eyes narrowed on the girl who had paused twenty feet away. She had dark-brown hair, a thin but determined face and a firm, lithe body. She carried one small suitcase.

"She is pretty and does stand out," he admitted cautiously. His gaze followed the girl, as she turned and walked slowly toward the distant exit. Abruptly, he nodded.

"She'll do. Pick her up and bring her to my apartment."

He climbed out of the plane, watched it glide off after the girl, then stepped into a private speedster that instantly hurtled off into the sky.

Evana Travis walked along the Pedestrian Way toward the exit not even vaguely aware of the machineful of men that followed her. She was trembling a little from the excitement of the landing, but her mind was still hard on the trip that had now ended.

She hadn't, when she came right down to it, utterly hadn't expected so much bigness. Figures never had had much meaning for her; and growing up in a world where people said, "Why, that's only a thousand light-years!"—somehow that had made of space an area as limited in a different way as Earth.

The very name—Ridge Stars—had a cozy sound. The picture of the system in her mind was of an intimately related group of suns pouring a veritable blaze of light into the surrounding heavens. Immigration-appeal folders did nothing to discourage her opinion.

The first shock came on the twelfth day out when the loud-speakers blared that the Ridge was now visible to the naked eye.

It was, all two hundred light-years of it, spread across the heavens. There were one hundred ninety-four suns in the group, seventy of them as large or larger than Sol—at least so the announcer shouted. Evana saw only pin points of light in a darkness the intensity of which was but faintly relieved by a sprinkling of more remote stars.

Grudgingly, she recognized that there *was* a resemblance to a ridge—and then all thought of the physical aspect of the stars ended, as the announcer said:

"—a vote will shortly be taken as to which planet of which sun every passenger of this ship will be landed on. The majority will decide and all must abide by the decision. Good-by for now."

Literally, her mind reeled. Then she was fighting through the packed corridors and decks. She reached the captain's cabin, and began her protest even as the door was banging shut behind her:

"What kind of outrage is this? I'm going to my sister's on the third planet of the Doridora sun. That's what I bought my ticket for, and that's where I'm going, vote or no vote."

"Don't be such an innocent," said the young man who sat behind the big desk in one corner of the small room.

Evana stared at him. "What do you mean?"

His grinning face mocked her. He had blue eyes and a space-tanned face, and he looked about thirty. He said:

"You're in space now, sister, far from the rigid laws of Earth. Where you're going atomic engineering is building a man-controlled universe, fortunes are made and lost every day, people die violently every hour, and the word of the big operators is the final authority."

He stopped. He stared at Evana sardonically. He said:

"It's a game, beautiful. That's what you've been caught up in. All the improvements in working conditions on Earth and other static planets during the past fifty years were designed to prevent wholesale immigration to the newer worlds of the Galaxy. The governments of the Ridge Star planets and other star groups have had to develop cunning counterants, including cutting the price of the trip to less than cost. That explains why it's impossible to do anything but dump each shipload *en masse*. This cargo, for instance, is headed for Delfi II."

"But," Evana gasped, "there's going to be a ballot taken as to which planet we land on. The announcer said—"

The young man roared with laughter. "Oh, sure." The mirth faded from his face. "And it's going to be all fair and square, too—pictures of each planet, short educational talks, an elimination vote every time four planets have been discussed—absolutely straight merit will decide the issue. But Delfi II will be selected because it's Delfi's turn, and so we're showing that planet to advantage, while the seamier sides of other planets get top billing this trip. Simple, eh?"

As Evana stood there too stunned to speak, he went on, "Delfi's a grand place: Endless jobs for everybody. Its capital city, Suderea, has four million population, with ninety buildings of more than a hundred stories—oceans, rivers, mountains, a grand climate— Oh, it's a great world!

"You'll hardly believe me, but there are men out in the Ridge Stars whose names are synonyms for money or power; and the greatest of them all is a young Norwegian-Englishman named Artur Blord. He's a byword. You'll hear his name in every town and village. In less than ten years he's made an astronomical fortune by outsmarting the big shots themselves. They exploit men; he exploits *them*. Why—"

"But you don't understand"—she felt desperate—"my sister expects me!"

His answer was a shrug. "Look, lady, the Ridge Star governments have offered a prize for the invention of an interstellar drive that won't infringe existing Earth patents, but until that prize is won the only way you'll ever get off Delfi II would be to get in good with some private owner of a spaceship. There just isn't any public transport.

"And now"—he stood up—"I'm afraid you'll have to stay here in my cabin until that ballot has been taken. It's my policy to be honest with those who complain, but it means restrictions for them. Don't get alarmed! I have no personal designs on you, even though you wouldn't have a single comeback if I did have. But a man like myself with seventeen wives on as many planets, thirty-eight kids and a soft heart can't afford to get mixed up with any more women."

He went out; the door clicked behind him—and now seven days later here was the unwanted world of Delfi II.

Evana paused uncertainly, at the great gate of the landing field. For a moment, as she stood there, staring down at the city below and the blue sheen of the sea beyond, she felt constricted, cold with dread.

There was a sound behind her. Rough hands smashed across her mouth, grabbed her arms. She was lifted bodily through a door into a wingless plane—that curled up into the air like smoke rising from a chimney.

Masked men—how heavy they were! Their very weight resisted her feeble efforts to claw free. She felt the slight bump as the plane landed. Then she was in a room, falling toward a couch.

She had not the faintest idea whether she had been flung down, or had collapsed. But lying down made things easier. The agony of exhaustion faded. The salty taste in her mouth, product of her terrible struggling, began to go away. Her vision came slowly back into focus.

She saw that she was in a magnificently furnished living room and—with a gasp Evana clawed to a sitting position—standing a dozen feet away, staring at her, was a powerful-looking man wearing a mask.

"Ah," said the man, "coming back to life, are you? Fine."

He moved in a leisurely fashion toward a table which stood against one wall. There were liquor bottles on it, glasses and other odds and ends. He looked over his shoulder; and Evana was aware of hard gray eyes peering at her from the mask slits.

"What'll you have, baby?" he said.

It was an abrupt recognition of the kind of mask he wore that throttled her scream in her throat. There was the exact bulge at the mouth that she had seen so often in movies, the bulge that was the machine which disguised the wearer's voice.

The reality of a voice-dissolver mask was so unreal that a wild laughter gurgled from Evana's lips. She stopped the laughter as she realized the hysteria in it, and found her voice.

"I want to know the meaning of this!" she gulped. "I'm sure there must be some mistake. I—"

The big man swung around on her. "Look, kid, quit babbling. There's been no mistake. I picked you up because you're a pretty and intelligent-looking girl. You're going to make a thousand stellors for yourself, and you're going to make it whether you like it or not. Now, stop looking like a scared fool."

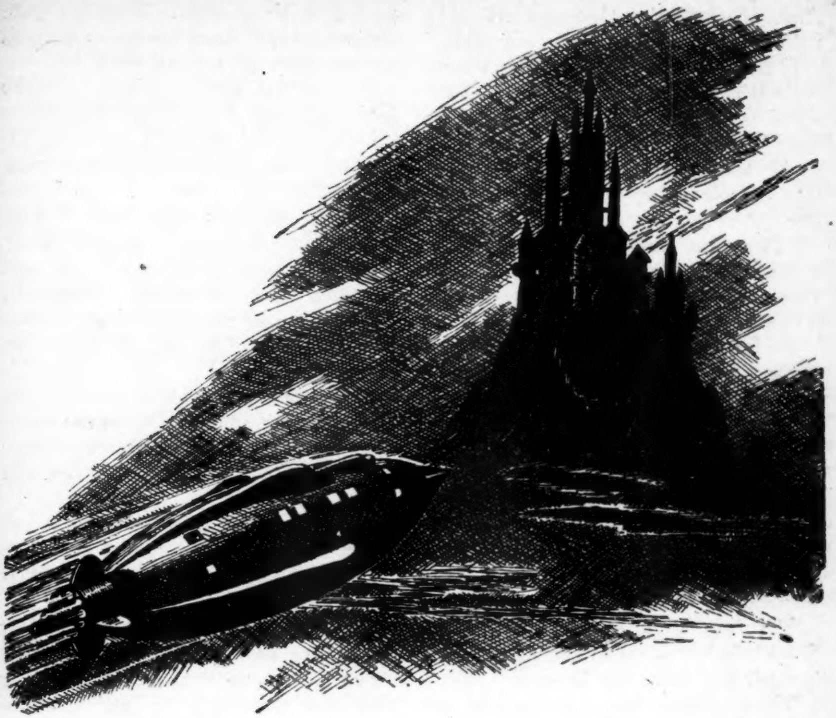
Evana tried to speak—and couldn't. It took a long moment to realize why: Relief! Relief so tremendous that it hurt deep down like a thing badly swallowed. Whatever was here, it wasn't death.

The bottom came back into her world; and then the man was speaking again, saying:

"What do you know of the Ridge Stars?"

She stared blankly. "Nothing."

"Good." He loomed above her, his eyes gleaming with satisfaction. He went on, "What was your occupation on Earth?"



"I was a mechanical-filing-system operator."

"Oh!" His tone held disappointment in it. "Well, it doesn't matter," he said finally. "The employment agency will put an educator on you, and make you into a passable private secretary in one hour."

It was like listening to a code message without knowing the key. Helplessness surged through her; and she had a sudden, vivid picture of herself sitting here in this room three thousand light-years from Earth *minutes* after her landing, with a masked man mouthing meaningless words at her.

Abruptly, there was no doubt at all that this was what the stories back on Earth had meant, the stories that said that on the far planets the frontiers extended right into the biggest of the cities. The crude kidnaping of her from an interstellar landing field couldn't be anything but frontier.

Her mind spun to a halt; and she saw that the man was fumbling in his pocket. He drew out a small white card. He said:

"Here's the name of your hotel. As soon as you're registered, go to the Fair Play Employment Agency—I've written the address on the back of the card—and they'll take care of you."

Evana took the card blankly, stuffed it unread into her purse. With widened eyes, she watched the man, as he picked up a small package from among the bottles on the table. She took the package with limp fingers when he held it out, heard him say:

"Put this in your purse, too. There's a note inside that explains everything you need to know. Don't be too shocked.

Remember, there's a thousand stellors in it for you, if everything goes smoothly."

It didn't seem possible. It didn't seem reasonable. The man couldn't be such a fool as to let her walk out of here now, out of this apartment, trusting her to do as he wanted after she had gone out into the obscuring labyrinth of a vast city. And yet—

"Two more things," the man said in a silky tone, "and then you can leave. First, have you ever heard of seven-day poison?"

He leaned forward a little as he spoke the words; there was an intensity in his manner that, more even than his words, brought a curdling chill. She gasped, "It's the poison that feeds on the blood; and on the seventh day undergoes a chemical change that—"

She saw the syringe in his hand then, and with a thin scream leaped to her feet. The man yelled:

"Grab her!"

She had forgotten the other men. They held her as the needle stabbed into her left leg above the knee.

The needle withdrew; the men let her go; and she helf-fell, half-sank to the floor from sheer reaction. She sat there, nursing, a sob in her throat, as the man said:

"The beauty of that poison is that it can be made like a lock pattern, in many thousands of slight variations—but the only antidote must have as its base a dose of the original poison, which as you can see is in my possession.

"Now, don't get hysterical." His tone was brutal. "I'll make up the antidote, and it'll be here after you've accomplished what I want."

"But I don't know where 'here' is!" Evana cried desperately. "Suppose something happens to you—"

"The second thing," said her tormentor curtly, "is another kind of precaution. It's just possible that several days may pass before you will find the opportunity to accomplish my purpose, and that in the meantime the man whose secretary you are to become may want you to be his mistress. Now, it's quite obvious we can't have any prissy scruples on your part so— *Hold her!*"

The second needle stabbed painfully into her arm just above the elbow. Above her, the man said:

"O. K., take her out, drop her off near the hotel!"

When the door had closed behind Evana, Delaney slowly took off his mask. He stood for a moment then, a dark brooding figure of a man. Gradually, his heavy face wreathed into a grim smile. He picked up an eldophone, and said:

"Get me the president of the J. H. Gorder Atomic Power Co. on the planet Fasser IV. Tell him Delaney's calling."

"One moment, sir," the operator trilled.

A minute passed, then a click sounded; and a very clear, strong voice said:

"Gorder speaking. What's on your mind, Delaney?"

"All the initial moves against Artur Blord are now taken," Delaney said. "Tell the others they can start arriving tomorrow morning at the Castle of Pleasure, and advise the Skal *thing* to prepare the torture chambers. Good-by."

Evana Travis read the letter that was in the package:

By the time you read this, you will have opened the package I gave you. You will have noted that the package contains: (1) a cigarette case with cigarettes in it; (2) a necklace with a watchlike pendant; (3) a package of white pills; (4) a V-shaped copper device; (5) a syringe.

The cigarettes are doped. If circumstances permit, you will try to give one of them to the man who will be your employer beginning tomorrow. The circumstances, however, must be that you and he are alone, and that he is not suspicious of you. The case ejects two cigarettes at a time; the outer one is doped, the inner one is not, always.

The white pills constitute a second line of attack. They can be used to drug such things as water, coffee, liquor; also they crumble easily and can be sprinkled over meat sandwiches, giving the appearance of salt.

The pendant is a radio device. As soon as Artur Blord, your future employer, is unconscious, unloosen the screw at the bottom and press the tiny bulb in the center. This will advise my men that you have taken the first step toward the accomplishment of our joint purpose.

The V-shaped copper device is designed to short-circuit the alarm system which Mr. Blord has installed on the top floor of his headquarters, which is located at 686 Financial Avenue. In order to employ this device properly it is necessary to understand the arrangement of rooms in Mr. Blord's penthouse.

The penthouse is divided into four main sections: the office, two apartments and a roof garden. The office is made up of three room, an anteroom, secretary's room and Mr. Blord's private office. From Mr. Blord's office a door leads to his personal eight-room apartment.

From the secretary's office there is an entrance to the other apartment, a small, four-room affair. This is where you will live, and I might say that the intimate implications of the arrangement are not misleading. Any unwillingness you may feel on the subject will be incentive to an early successful conclusion of your mission. The greater danger from the poison should, however, restrain you from inopportune action.

Both apartments have French doors which open onto the roof garden; and it is beside the French door of Mr. Blord's apartment that you will find an ornate metal instrument with a slit in it. Slide the V-shaped device into this slit, point first, until the two translucent ends of the V light up.

Now, press the bulb of the pendant again. My men will arrive within a few minutes. You must accompany them if you want your antidote and your reward. Afterward, I will transport you to any of the Ridge Star planets you desire. Obviously, for your own safety, you cannot remain on Delfi II.

It is not necessary for you to know all the reasons for my actions. Suffice to say that Mr. Blord's supercleverness has at last aroused the ire of the men who are actually building the Ridge Star civilization as distinct from Blord's trick methods of getting a share of the profits.

Item No. 5 in this package, the syringe, contains Nonchalant, a dose of which taken tomorrow morning will steady your nerves, keep color in your cheeks, no matter how great your inner nervousness. I advise you to take it every morning until you have accomplished your purpose.

As soon as you have read this letter, go to the Fair Play Employment Agency, whose address is on the card I gave you. I warn you most earnestly there is no time to waste. Tomorrow the seven-day poison will only have six days to go. You've got to do what I want—or die!

She slept badly. She did remember in the morning to inject a dose of Nonchalant into the upper part of her arm. But through all the actions and thoughts and memories that flooded her mind ran one dominant strain of terror:

She had to do what the masked man wanted, with utter will, with utter singleness of purpose. There *wasn't any* alternative.

The morning streets were packed, long wide boulevards of rushing human masses. Overhead streamed a countless swarm of airabouts. Number 686 Financial Avenue was a shining metal shaft of a building. It was narrow at the top, but at the bottom it spread over nine square blocks.

Great avenues plowed through its base. Plane shafts crisscrossed its upper stories; and at about the fortieth story was a sign that shone in the sun:

ARTUR BLORD HOLDING CO., LTD.

Far back in Evana's mind was the astounded thought that surely *she* wouldn't be hired as secretary by a man who must have tens of thousands of employees craving promotion to such a high position.

But the girl at the reception desk inside the first main entrance stared enviously at her agency card, and said:

"Go straight up to the one hundred ninetieth floor. I'll phone up to Mr. Magrusson."

And at the one hundred ninetieth floor, a plump, middle-aged man was waiting in the hallway. He rubbed his hands together unctuously.

"I must verify one thing," he said. "You did arrive yesterday on that freighter from Earth? And this is your first job, not only on Delfi, but on any planet other than Earth?"

So it was her recent Earth origin that gave her such a startling preference. Evana drew a deep breath. "I swear it!" she said.

The man smiled at her, his pale-blue eyes watering. "Good. We'll check that thoroughly, of course. But now, go straight up to the penthouse floor, and make yourself at home. Mr. Blord is expected shortly. Until he comes, you may familiarize yourself with the room arrangements. Everything on that floor is in your charge as of this moment. You may examine anything you please that isn't locked, and call me for any information you may require."

He went off down the hall and disappeared through a door that banged.

The silence of being alone brought no peace. Having an entire floor to herself only made her thoughts the more vivid; their dark continuity suffered neither the restraint of interruption nor the easement of hope.

All normal reaction was overshadowed by the menacing words Magrusson had spoken: "Mr. Blord is expected shortly."

The strain of that had no relation to anything she had ever endured.

Exploration did provide a brief surcease. But even there her preknowledge of the room arrangements canceled the full effect. For the description in the letter was exact. Seeing the reality simply filled in details.

Her office was a large denlike room with books, a filing system, a desk equipped with automatic Recorders, and there were several mechanical contrivances scattered along the walls that she barely glanced at.

Evana made a swift circuit of the private office beyond. It was a larger version of the secretary's room, but without the filing system. She did not go into the eight-room apartment of Artur Blord, simply glanced in, long enough to see the green foliage of the roof garden through the living-room windows.

The shaky thought came that she ought to make sure there was such an energy device to cut the alarm system as the letter had stated. But—*Mr. Blord is expected shortly*

She withdrew to the secretary's office. Slowly, her nerve crept back, but she made no immediate attempt at further exploration. She began an elaborate examination of the mechanical filing system, but it seemed to yield nothing except detailed information about the geography, in the science sense of the word, of hundreds of planets.

She found herself frowning over the facts that came out, myriad facts about metals, forests, gems, valuable soils and estimates of value that seemed to have no relation to the money estimates that were also given. There was a field of chromium on the planet Tanchion IV, value: one hundred billion stellors; value: "Just plain slogging. Let somebody else do it all."

The two-value system extended everywhere. For a forest on Tragona VII, the first value was: All treasure wood; priceless. The second valuation said: "Dennis Kray is operator. Hard, cruel, brilliant. Should be interesting if I ever get around to it."

Her appetite and her watch registered two o'clock simultaneously on her startled consciousness. The hunger was distracting, a pressing force that grew with the thought of it. Twice, she started toward the door that led to the four-room aparment—*her* apartment now—and each time stopped herself with a shudder of repulsion that she couldn't explain immediately.

Gradually, she realized what it was. There would be food all right in the kitchen of that apartment, but there would also be reminders of its previous occupant, the last secretary-mistress who was now gone into some unexplained discard. She *couldn't* go into that room.

Phone Magrusson, she thought, and shivered a negation because—suppose the plump creature tried to forestall his boss, and made a pass at her. Her enslaved brain would instantly put her at his mercy.

So long as the effect of the drug lasted she was any man's woman.

It was three o'clock before she recognized the fury of her thoughts for the madness it was—drew herself willfully back from the dark abyss, and went into the apartment.

It was a woman's living room that greeted her eyes and a woman's bedroom. Pastel colors made a muted pattern of gorgeousness. Everywhere were frills, knicknacks, fluffy comforts, extras from store departments that men would never think of visiting.

And one thing was overwhelmingly clear: It had been furnished without regard for money. After she had satisfied the first ravening impulses of her hunger, Evana sat frowning at the place. She would change the curtains, she thought, and the horrible, modern bed in the bedroom would go out. She had always dreamed of having a really costly canopied four poster and—

She caught her mind in its gyrations—and sat appalled. Shame came, then weariness. She thought at last hopelessly: What an incredible organ the human brain was. Given time, it accepted anything.

She stood up, and it was then for the first time that she saw the photograph. It was standing on the mantelpiece of the atomic fireplace; and she knew instantly that she was looking at the eidolon of Artur Blord.

It was the fine, sensitive countenance of a man of about thirty. If there had ever been Norwegian blood in his racial stock, it didn't show now. The lean face with its thin, aristocratic nose, its strong chin and firm lips was English even to the curve of the cheeks, the tilt of the eyebrows.

His appearance disturbed her; not that it could make any difference. She *had* to carry out her purpose—but her mind went back to what the captain of the space freighter had said about the big financial and industrial operators in this part of the Galaxy. Strange to think the man had even mentioned Artur Blord as the greatest of them all because—what was it the commander had said?—the others exploited men, and Blord exploited *them*.

She must have slept for she wakened with a start, and saw that it was pitch dark. Brief panic came, and ended as, through the living-room windows, she saw a great moon come out from behind a dark cloud; its gleam poured through the glass and suffused the room with pale beauty.

She went to the windows and stared up at it, a globe of light ten times as big as Earth's satellite. Memory came that the educational talks on the space freighter had proved it wasn't a moon at all, but a dead companion planet as big as Delfi II; and that once, long before man came, there had been life on it—of which obscene remnants remained.

Evana's mind withdrew slowly from the moon, came back to her own situation. Funny how she had wakened with such a jerk as if—

Bzzzz! The sound made her jump. And then she stood as stiff as stone as a strong, clear man's voice said from a mechanical:

"Miss Travis, didn't you hear my first ring? I'm calling from my office, and I'd like you to come here as soon as you can."

"I," Artur Blord was saying an hour later, "like new cities, new planets. They're soulless. They have no culture, no institutions with hardening of the arteries, nobody going around yelling for prohibition of this, that and the other. If a man's got a religion—and who hasn't?—he's not scheming to force it down somebody else's throat— Just a minute, here's something. Grab your recorder! Get this tight. It's for your private information!"

Evana grabbed. For an hour she had felt herself the center of a cyclone. A dozen times already she had feverishly manipulated her recorder to take dictation at a breath-taking speed. Her new employer dictated as he talked, apparently without thought or—she made the mental note—discretion.

For minutes on end, utterly without restraint, he had discussed vast projects on which he was engaged, switching from one business to another with bewildering rapidity; and always the only qualification was: "This is for your private information!"

He said now: "It's just a small note this time. Always spell out the name of our company in small letters, but put the word 'limited' in capitals. There have been some darned funny court rulings on that limited business on the Ridge Star planets. For instance, once it was held that using small letters made the word 'limited' appear insignificant beside a really grand sounding company name. Abbreviating it puts you out of court so fast you won't even know what hit your bank roll. There's some people will tell you that this is an age of science, but they're wrong—"

It took a moment for Evana to realize that he had changed the subject. She blinked, then adjusted, as Blord rambled on at speed:

"They're wrong because the great developments today are not in science, but in the use of discovered science. People are constantly amazed that I have no science degrees. I'm really the lucky one. I couldn't tell you the electronic structure of more than half a dozen atomettes, or the composition of half a dozen chemical compounds. But I know something far better than that: I know what those things do, and what their relation is to human beings and human progress. I consider myself a sort of superco-ordinator."

It was his boasting that ended all her fear. There was, of course, the possibility that he was talking about himself and his merits in a perfectly objective fashion, and it even seemed probable that he'd be nice in a conceited sort of way if she ever got to know him. But the weights that were on her mind didn't leave room for immediate interest in any man or woman.

There was only her necessary purpose. And, thank God, he was so utterly guileless and unsuspicious. In a minute now, she'd bring out her cigarettes and—what was he saying? Cigarettes! Would she have a cigarette?

Evana felt briefly startled; then: "I have my own, thank you," she said.

On Blord's desk the needle attached to the chair in which the girl sat was jumping like a full-grown Yadr. Doped cigarettes, he thought cynically. And to think he'd been fishing around for an hour expecting something infinitely more subtle.

He had known the moment the girl entered his office that something was wrong. All the thousands of hours he had spent training himself to be what he was concentrated into the first glance he gave her, and revealed that she was mentally nervous without any of the physical by-products. That meant—dosed with Nonchalant at a hundred stellors a gram. Would an immigrant have that kind of money? Not normally.

The rest was merely a matter of trying to find out who was behind her. And yet all the names he mentioned scarcely stirred the needle. Either she didn't know—or the time had come for more direct action.

"Earth cigarettes!" he said eagerly. "Would you mind letting me have one? I sometimes long for them."

He walked around his desk, over to her. The girl manipulated the ejector and brought forth two cigarettes. She took the inner one, then held the other out to him. He took it without question.

She accepted the light he offered. He walked back to his chair as if forgetting his own cigarette, and sat idly holding it between his fingers. The needle, he saw grimly, was hovering around its zenith.

He smiled finally, put the cigarette to his lips, picked up the lighter, stared for a moment at its flame—and with his foot pressed the lever that activated the energy of the chair in which the girl sat.

She crumpled like a child falling to sleep.

"—listen, Doc," he was saying into his phone a few minutes later, "I know it's past two, but I want you up here immediately. I've got a girl whom I want examined physically and mentally, the full hypnotism treatment if necessary. I want her in such a keyed-up condition that she'll be able to look at pictorial records of all the big operators I have had anything to do with the past year, and be able to recognize them even if she only saw them previously with masks on. I've got to find out who's gunning for me. . . . You're coming? O. K. Make it fast."

It took about an hour for the tests, but at last the picture came clear. Doc Gregg dimmed the strong lights that had blazed for so long at the girl's unconscious body; and Blord staring silently, savagely, down at her thought:

"She looks like a tired youngster caught by weariness far from her bed." He laughed finally, curtly.

"Really," he said, "I suppose I have no business getting het up. There just isn't any way of stopping the use of sex dope and the seven-day poison; they fit in too perfectly with the lusts of men. And in a universe of a billion planets who can ever find the underground factories where the damned brews are turned out?"

He saw that the old man was staring at him thoughtfully. Doc Gregg said:

"Why don't you try hiring men secretaries?"

Blord shook his head. "Men who come to the Ridge Stars are too ambitious to be good employees of anybody. I've had two as secretaries. A fellow called Grierson who sold information about me to the Munar I mining people. The money he got he used to start himself up as an operator on one of the Gildal planets. The other man couldn't bear the thought of all the money I was making, and tried to shoot me.

"You see," he went on, frowning, "men regard themselves as my competitors; women do not. I've had women angry with me because it never even occurred to me to marry them. But no sensitive, intelligent woman—and Magrusson hires no others—has ever tried to do me damage. That may be a callous way of looking at it, but it's the truth."

His dark gaze played over the still form of Evana. "This is the first case of a girl being foisted on me with criminal intent. But it merely proves that my habit of hiring only secretaries fresh from Earth, because of their ingrained sense of loyalty, has been found out, and that I'd better investigate the powers behind the Fair Play Employment Agency."

He broke off, smiled grimly. "So it's Delaney, Gorder, Dallans, Cansy, Neek and, I have no doubt, the rest of the ninety-four competitors for the prize being offered for a new space drive, who are behind this attack. I knew I'd shock them when I entered the competition two weeks ago. After all the money they've spent on research, to have somebody enter who has a reputation for never losing—but I can say honestly this time my conscience is clear. I'm doing it entirely for the good of the Ridge Stars. Well"—he smiled again, wryly—"almost entirely."

"What's the dope on that space drive, anyway?" Doc Gregg said.

"My old infallible method," Blord laughed. "I played bullish on human genius, and bear on human nature. You may not believe this, but my research laboratories didn't do a stroke of work prior to a month or so ago. And yet we've got the winning drive."

He saw that the old man was staring at him from shrewd gray eyes. "I'm not going to guess what you're up to, young man. But it looks as if you've cut into a hornet's nest. What about this kid? She's got five days to live; any bets that they try to save her if she doesn't deliver the goods?"

"I wouldn't even bet they'd save her if she did." Blord snapped. He scowled, said finally. "Damn it, I can't carry the world on my shoulders. I feel sorry for her, but her only hope is for me to let my capture go through.

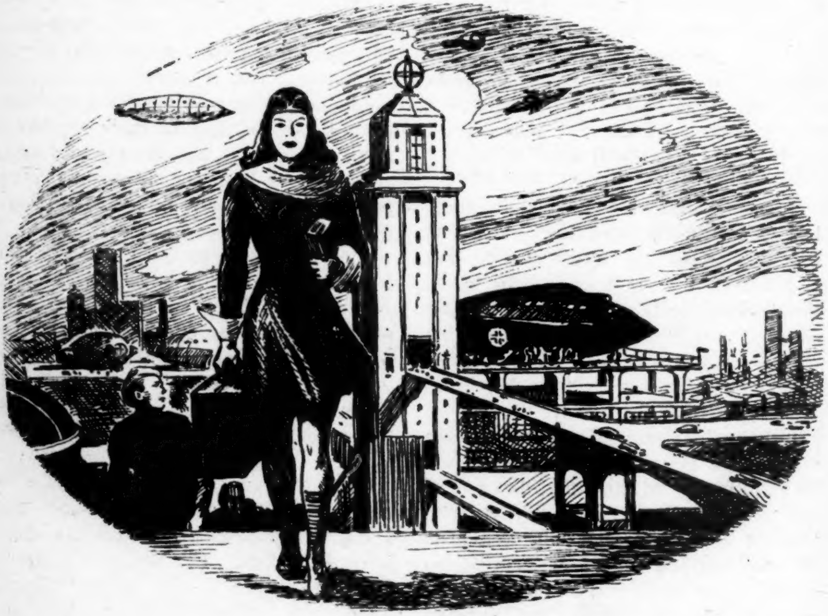
"The worst of it is, they'll be waiting at the impregnable Castle of Pleasure on Delfi I. It's the only place where a bunch like that would trust themselves together. If I thought there was one chance in five, I might risk being the guest of the Skal *thing,* but not—"

He stopped. His eyes narrowed with the sudden thought that came. He grew aware finally that the old medico was looking at him with a grin. Doc Gregg said softly:

"What do you want me to do, son—set everything up as it was?"

"Yes," said Blord slowly, "yes. It's that damned instinct of mine for playing with fire. To begin with, I'll need some preconditioning—"

Evana had a sense of faintness; that was all. Then she straightened; and there was Artur Blord still lighting the cigarette. She stared at him in fascination as he took a deep puff with evident enjoyment. She cringed inwardly as a startled expression leaped into his eyes.



He half-slid, half-fell to the floor and lay there face up, the ceiling light glowing down on his closed eyes. In that quiet repose, the noble lines of his countenance seemed accentuated; all the sillier aspects of him, the volubility, the immense and casual indiscretions, the braggadocio faded and were lost in that pure physical tranquillity.

He looked like Adonis struck down

by the killer boar, like a man already dead, needing only a coffin to seal him forever from life.

It was funny, Evana thought shakily, staring down at him, how she had really known all the time that she couldn't possibly ever sacrifice anyone else to save herself. Funny how she had known, too, deep in her mind, that only the ultimate moment would bring her face to face with the reality.

Stunned, she sank down in her chair, and buried her face in her hands. After ten minutes Artur Blord stood up from the floor, and said gently:

"Thanks, Miss Travis. Your action in a crisis makes me very glad I decided to try to save you. But now, you've got to go through with it. Listen—"

It was about seven minutes later that Delaney's men landed, and carried Blord aboard the spaceship. The girl went along without a word.

Blord, lying on a narrow bunk, felt the brief strain as the machine launched upward toward Delfi I.

The dark Castle of Pleasure stood on the Mountain of Eternal Night on the dead moon that was the companion planet of Delfi II. Remnant of a forgotten civilization, its scores of towers pierced the heavens like gigantic swords. No man had ever delved into all its labyrinthian depths, for men entered that antique place only by permission of the one living relict of its long-dead builders, by the permission of the Skal *thing*.

And it wasn't just because men were being polite, either, Blord remembered grimly. Several secret attempts had been made by Ridge Star governments to smash the structure, to end a particularly hideous form of white-slave traffic. But atomic energy washed from the alien towers like water spraying over steel; the great doors remained impervious to energy blows of a billion horsepower; and patrol ships, commissioned to prevent orgy hunters from seeking the Castle's unnatural pleasures, had a habit of disappearing, never to be heard from again.

And long ago the Skal *thing* had let it be known that the castle was a safe meeting place, at a price, for men who couldn't otherwise trust themselves together. The great operators of the Ridge Stars held cautious test meetings and—

The ship was slowing. Blord grew tense as, somewhere ahead and outside, there was a rattle of metal, a dull roar that ended as swiftly as it began. The ship moved forward, then stopped again. The rattle of metal sounded once more, vibrantly, behind the ship this time.

They were, Blord thought tensely, inside the Castle; and he was committed irrevocably. He lay, eyes closed as tight as ever, but his body was quivering now. He hadn't long to wait.

Something, a strange, slimy something slithered against his mind. He had expected it; the stories he had heard had even described what it was like, this mind reading by the Skal *thing*—but the actuality was stunning.

He lay struggling to suppress his horror, and keep his mind quiet, as a visualization transferred from the *thing* to him, a visualization of a long, scaly, reptile body crouching in some nether darkness, peering into his brain with a glee that had no human counterpart—the Skal projecting an image of itself.

And the picture clung; the reptilian mind studied him, and finally sent a caressing, steely thought:

"You puzzle me, Artur Blord, for you are not in mental night, as you pretend. Yet you have come to my old abode, from which none can escape unless my clients will it. I shall watch the unfolding of the plan in your mind, and shall not betray it. But beware! No force of yours, whether by impulse of the agony of the moment or deep-seated will shall prevail."

Blord made an intense effort, sent

a thought straight at that nightmare image:

"I'll pay you double, treble, what they are paying, if you help me in a crisis."

Hideous laughter billowed soundlessly in his mind, and finally a satirical thought:

"Would you seduce the honor of my house? Know then that today and until further notice the chamber of torture and all its services belong to those who have it. Such is my code. So it shall be ever."

Blord snarled, "Go to hell, you *damned* thing."

Almost, he said it aloud. But the mind, the image, was withdrawing, still giving vent to its unnatural laughter. Simultaneously—and that was what stopped his words—hands grabbed him out of the bunk. A voice said:

"Lay him on the gravitor roller. Tell Travis she's got to stay aboard. The boss is going to keep her for a while as his girl friend."

There was a hiss of air locks opening, then the gravitor began to move. It seemed to be rolling along a glass-smooth floor. The pressure of light on Blord's eyelids shadowed noticeably; very carefully, and for the first time, he parted them ever so slightly.

He was in a dim tunnel gliding along faster than he had thought. A gleamy roof slid by, a dully lighted surface that seemed to emit a reflection of some remoter light rather than itself being a source.

Abruptly, the tunnel widened, opened up into a large round room. Blord had a swift picture of men shapes in semi-darkness. The next instant the gravitor slowed; as it pulled to a stop, a man's ironic voice said somewhere out of the darkness:

"Ah, our guest has arrived!"

Then: "Waken him!"

Blord sat up. He had no desire to have the unpleasant revival drug injected into his system. These doped cigarettes were not expected to have a lasting effect, so his return to consciousness should not cause too much suspicion. A few doubts, however, wouldn't matter.

He peered around him; then, "Good God!" he said.

He mustn't overdo his surprise, he thought. A little frank bewilderment; and then—

He saw for the first time that a radium bulb, turned dead slow, lay on or protruded from the middle of the floor. A ghostly luminescence shed from it; and it was by that dim radiance that the blobs of men were visible.

The masks the men wore added an inhuman quality to the scene, that ended as the shape that had already spoken said:

"I don't think we need delay, now that our guest is recovered. We are all busy men; and even the subtle joys of the Castle of Pleasure cannot long hold our various attentions.

"As you know, when the Galactic Co., believing its space drive patents made its position invincible, asked prohibitive rates and impossible preliminary fees to start an organized passenger and transport service in the Ridge Star system, our governments announced an open competition.

"They had purchased local rights to a drive vastly inferior to the superb Galactic drive, and asked competitors to put their research staffs to the task of improving it. All improvements were guaranteed to the companies that made them and, in the event of duplication, an equitable adjustment was promised."

Now, Blord thought, now! "Pardon me," he said in an intense voice. "But has anyone developed a drive that's as much as one quarter as fast as the Galactic? If not, then every person in this meeting is cutting his financial throat."

"What do you mean?" said a voice.

"Never mind what he means!" roared the man who was standing.

"Can't you see he's trying to start us arguing?"

"I mean," Blord cut in swiftly, "that a property pays according to the speed with which produced goods are transferred to market. The only reason I entered the contest at all was when I heard of some of the ridiculously low speeds that—"

"SHUT UP!"

Blord shrugged, and smiled savagely. He had put over his first point. It was one that had undoubtedly occurred previously to them all, but it could stand stressing. The speaker was continuing:

"Two weeks ago, with a great fanfare, a very flourish of publicity, Artur Blord entered the competition. What had been a serious and expensive business enterprise became a circus. Such is the fantastic reputation of this man that the ninety-four companies which had spent billions of stellors on research were instantly laughingstocks, pitied by newspaper editorials, butts for fools, comedians, pranksters. And there is, of course, no doubt that Blord, knowing his fame, knew also that he could not afford a failure. Therefore, we assumed that he had the prize-winning drive; and, through the Skal, someone called the first meeting, where a plan was agreed upon, and I was selected by lot to carry it out.

"Our purpose is to obtain from Mr. Blord the secret of his drive, and to have him sign over to us all rights to his ship—"

"Is it possible," Blord marveled, "that the great individualistic operators of the Ridge Stars have at last agreed to co-operate, even if it is only a division of spoils that is involved? However, I'm sorry, you're all too late."

"What do you mean?"

"I have already assigned my rights to the Delfi Government, to take effect in the event that I do not turn up at the contest, with the stipulation that a public utility be formed. As for getting the secret out of me, that's impossible. Purely by accident I had myself counter-hypnotized today, and by some odd coincidence it was about this very matter. However—"

"WHAT?"

The shout was followed by a dead silence that developed into a restless shuffling of bodies. At last, however, a voice said softly:

"At least we can still kill him. At least we can prevent him from being

DON'T BE CHEEKY, MISTER!
WHY NOT? I SHAVE WITH STAR BLADES!
6NX PROCESS
STAR
DOUBLE EDGE
4 for 10¢
STAR
SINGLE EDGE

a damned nuisance to us in the future."

Here, beyond doubt, was death, unless—

Blord climbed slowly down from the gravitor. It struck him for the first time as his feet touched the hard floor that he was not, as he had always believed, a brave man. There was a weakness in his knees that made him feel wobbly.

This damned dim room, he thought shakily. He tried to picture it as it must have been when the Skal *things* were a young and vibrantly alive race and—

And couldn't! There was only himself here in this hell hole. He said aloud, grimly:

"You seem to have me, gentlemen. But I would say that you should think twice before you kill me. When I get into traps like this, I am usually prepared to make almost any kind of deal."

"The rat's beginning to squeal," somebody sneered from the dimness.

Blord shrugged. In such circumstances insults did not begin to touch him.

"When I eat humble pie, I eat all of it," he said coolly. "Now, as I understand it, the two main complaints against me are that I have endangered research investments and that I have made you all the subject of ridicule. It seems to me that if everyone's investment is guaranteed and the ridicule is turned on me, you gain—"

Somebody exploded, "Is this a man talking or a louse?"

There was a general murmur of disgust; and Blord felt the tensity of contempt that was suddenly out there. In spite of himself he flushed. He knew the codes that governed these far-flung frontiers of space; and he could suddenly visualize how his words, as he was uttering them, would later be broadcast to shame him. The dark picture put sharpness into his tone, as he snapped:

"Hear my proposition at least. It's to your advantage."

"Oh, sure," said a scathing voice. "Let's hear his proposition. Our stomachs are turned now. The worst shock is over."

Blord felt a quaver of irritation, intense irritation. They were all crazy, these men who used sex-dope on innocent women, seven-day poison, murder and straight robbery as instruments of their will, to feel so strongly about an apparent show of cowardice. With an effort he fought down his anger. The code was there. It existed. He hadn't figured it into his plan, but the very starkness of their feelings on the subject made everything easier.

"My ship," he began, "will win the race. It has attained a speed just under eighty-one percent of a Galactic liner. If anyone can equal that, just let him speak now, and I'll go quietly to the slaughterhouse. Well?"

After a moment, he went on more sardonically, "I am prepared to make the following offer, to be drawn up immediately, signed and sealed:

"That a joint stock company be formed with an issue of two hundred shares. Of these, fifty shall belong to me. One share each shall be assigned to each of ninety-three of the ninety-four companies, on the condition that they sign over all their patent rights to the new firm.

"The other fifty-seven shares shall be turned over to Selden Delaney, who will operate the company under the Kallear Regulations.

"I must be released immediately after the signing.

"Evana Travis shall be given the antidote and turned over to me unharmed immediately.

"Anyone or group may launch all the ridiculing propaganda they care to against me.

"The whole agreement is nullified unless I am alive at the time of the contest, and it goes into effect only if my ship does in fact win the prize."

A man shouted, "This will ruin you, Blord. The lowest riffraff will despise you after we get through publicizing how much dirt you've eaten."

It was several hours later that his spaceship flashed down to pick Blord up. And it was then, as he was stepping out of one of the dim tunnels of the Castle into the bright interior of the machine, that he felt the unwholesome touching against his mind that was the thought of the Skal *thing:*

"Well done, Artur Blord. How they will howl when their ridicule recoils upon them. Your ingenuity has given an unexpected titillation to my old bones. To show my appreciation for such an intellectual delicacy, you may call upon me at any time for one favor. Good luck."

The slimy mind withdrew into its night.

"But what *is* your plan?" Evana asked blankly later, as the ship hurtled through space. "You said you had one. But all I can see is that you're going to lose your reputation, and you've signed away seventy-five percent of your rights to the winning space drive. If that's your idea of victory— And why did you give that terrible Delaney the lion's share?"

She looked genuinely bewildered. Blord stared at her thoughtfully, said finally:

"Don't forget that I didn't have a space drive three weeks ago. And don't forget, either, that I'm a twenty-five percent man, generally speaking. I can't be bothered with the details of an operation. What mainly interests me was that there should be a fast transport system.

"Of course"—he grinned—"once I thought of it, the idea was too lovely to let go by default."

He broke off: "As for Delaney, obviously the man who actually runs a great interstellar line has to have a big incentive. And it had to be Delaney because he had you and the antidote. I had no choice; and don't think he didn't know it, either."

"But what *was* your idea?"

"It's really very simple. To begin with, I was absolutely certain that there would be merging of discoveries after the race that would greatly increase the speed involved. I anticipated. It cost me the fantastic sum of seven hundred million stellors in bribes, but sure enough a few simple combinations of several companies' different developments of the original atomic reaction and—

"You see," he finished blandly, "when they discover that they've signed away the patent rights on which my drive is based, that in fact *they* provided the drive, I don't think they'll feel like laughing any more."

There was a long silence. At last Evana tossed her head, said almost defiantly, "What about me?"

She was aware of his dark eyes studying her thoughtfully. He said at last, "I'm taking you to your sister on Doridora III."

"Oh!" said Evana. She wondered dimly why she felt miserable. The answer struck her two days later as she watched the silver-shining ship recede into the bluest sky she had ever seen. She whirled on her sister.

"Do you know what's the matter with the Ridge Stars?" she said savagely. "There's too damned many chivalrous people."

THE END.

Whom The Gods Love

by Lester del Rey

The Jap bullet killed his personality—but didn't quite kill him. It gave him a new sense—and was, for the Japs, a most horrible mistake—

Illustrated by Fax

At first glance the plane appeared normal enough, though there was no reason for its presence on the little rocky beach of the islet. But a second inspection would have shown the wreckage that had been an undercarriage and the rows of holes that crisscrossed its sides. Forward, the engine seemed unharmed, but the propeller had shredded itself against a rock in landing, and one wing flopped slowly up and down in the brisk breeze that was blowing, threatening to break completely away with each movement. Except for the creak and groan of the wing, the island was as silent as the dead man inside the plane.

Then the sun crept up a little higher over the horizon, throwng back the shadows that had concealed the figure of a second man who lay sprawled out limply on the sand, still in the position his body had taken when he made the last-second leap. In a few places, ripped sections of his uniform showed the mark of passing bullets, and blood had spilled out of a half-inch crease in his shoulder. But somehow he had escaped all serious injuries except one; centered in his forehead, a small neat hole showed, its edges a mottle of blue and reddish brown, with a trickle of dried blood spilling down over his nose and winding itself into a half mustache over his lip. There was no mark to show that bullet had gone on through the back of his head.

Now, as some warmth crept down to the islet from the rising sun, the seemingly dead figure stirred and groaned softly, one hand groping up toward the hole in his forehead. Uncertainly, he thrust a finger into the hole, then withdrew it at the flood of pain that followed the motion. For minutes he lay there, feeling the ebb and flow of the great forces that were all around him, sensing their ceaseless beat with the shadow of curiosity. Then his eyes opened to see the flapping wing of the plane, and he noticed that it was outside the rhythm of the forces that moved. His eyes followed its outlines, then pierced through the pitted covering and made out the form of the corpse within.

It lay sprawled there, stiff and rigid, and within it was none of the small trickle of energy that coursed through his own body. Yet there was something familiar about the still form. A vagrant whim of his mind caused the corpse to pull itself around with one stiff hand until he could see its face—or rather, what had been its face. Then, after comparing it with his own, he found no resemblance and let the body slide back into silence. About him the little eddies of force resumed their routine, no longer perturbed by the impulses that had gone out of his mind toward them.

He turned his head then, glancing over the little island and out toward the sea, wondering if all the world was like this. It seemed empty and not a little ridiculous, but there was nothing to show otherwise. He wondered vaguely whether he had come there newly or had always lain there; and a further wonder came to him as he looked at the plane again. It was out of keeping with the rest of the island, and since its type was different, he assumed that it had come there from elsewhere. Inside it, the corpse reminded him that it had not come alone. Well, then, probably he had come with it. Perhaps the still figure inside would stir to life under the rays of the sun, as he had. He clutched at the passing forces again, twisting them in a way he did not understand, and the limbs of the dead man lifted him and brought him out into the sunlight on all fours.

For minutes the living man stared down at the other figure, but tired of it when he saw no signs of warming into life. Perhaps he was an accident and the other was the normal form of his kind. Or perhaps the other had offended the forces around and they had drained themselves out of him. It was of no importance.

Again he looked upward, watching the dancing paths of the light from the sun, and as he bent his head the *wrong* feeling inside it grew greater. Slowly he lifted his hand, but that motion caused none of the racing pain, so it was not that movement itself involved the feeling. Perhaps it was the hole in his head. Gently with his fingers he pressed the edges of the hole together, drawing the skin out over it until it was healed; It helped the little surface pain, but made no change in the inner agony. Apparently the forces of life were painful—no matter, then; since the pain was obviously a part of him, he must accept it. Noting the tear in his shoulder, he forced that closed again with his fingers, then glanced back at the sky.

Above, a bird wheeled slowly over the sea, and he watched it move, noticing in it the same stirring life that he sensed in himself, but without the awareness of the forces about. On an impulse, he willed it to him, reaching out as the little form slipped down and forward. Behind it came a crack as the air exploded back into the hole its passage had torn; the bird was a sodden mass as he felt it, warm but inanimate, and he tossed it aside in sudden disgust.

And still the wing of the plane flapped awkwardly in the wind, and his eyes slid back to it again, his mind remembering the beat of the bird's wings. He reeled toward it, his steps uncertain, until the effort displeased him and he lifted himself upward on the waves around him and slipped forward easily toward the plane. Vague memories stirred in his head, and his thorax contracted in a strange yearning feeling toward this great dead bird. It was wounded also, and its head was filled with a strange rock that made it sluggish. Gently he pulled out the engine, first causing the bolts and holding part to drop away, and put it aside on the sand; his eyes went to the guns, but the little eddy of memory told him to leave them, and he obeyed, though he pulled away the landing gear and tossed it beside the engine and broken propeller. One by one he pressed the holes in the sides together and let the broken skin of the wing grow back, as

his own shoulder had done. The other wing was stiff, paralyzed, apparently holding the machine down by its uselessness, so he looked inside to find it filled with unjointed struts; with his elbow for a model, he corrected the error in the machine, standing back in approval as that wing also began moving gently up and down.

There had been no purpose in his actions beyond an idle kindliness, but now he considered the plane and the bleak sea and sky beyond the islet; over the horizon lay other lands, perhaps, since the bird had come from that direction. And out there might be others like himself who could explain the mystery of his existence. Surely there was a reason for it, since the mothering forces of the cosmos about him were moving purposefully, in ordered pattern, except when his will disturbed them. And since he could mold them, surely he was greater even than they, and his purpose must be higher. He started to rise and glide forward on the wings of those forces, but the plane below him called him back, filled with an odd desire for it. It, too, seemed to want to leave, and he let himself drop inside it, down onto the seat that was before his eyes. Then, responsive to his desire, the forces eddied into it, the wings lifted resolutely and beat down together, and it lifted up and away, the little island dropping from sight behind him.

But as his attention wandered, it fluttered unevenly and began to fall, calling him back to the need of supervising. That should not be so. Once begun, the plane was supposed to go ahead on its own—memory assured him of that. And obediently the forces slid back, gliding over the surface of the ship, becoming a part of it. This time, as his mind wandered, the wings beat on in a smooth rush, the plane answering without thought to his uncertain twist of the wheel. That was better. His arms made movements on the controls almost instinctively, and now the ship obeyed them, its passage silent except for the keening of the air as it forced its way ahead.

He sent it up, higher and still higher, but below him the sea stretched out in seeming endlessness. Finally his breath began to come hard, and the air to thin out, though the forces grew thicker and stronger. For a little while he let them push against the air inside the cabin to thicken it and climbed on, but increasing height began to make objects hard to see below, and he dropped back, returning to his straight line. The needle on the compass pointed due north.

The sun was in the middle of the sky when the vague feeling inside him brought visions to his mind, and he recognized the need of food. There were several mental picture, some sharp, some vague, and he selected an apple and ham sandwich at random, solidifying the pictures of them and eating. The first bite was flat, tasteless stuff, but his senses recognized the error and his mind brought the cosmic forces into play, correcting them as he chewed. The other urge was heightened instead of removed, but it was an hour later before he recognized it as a need of water and drank deeply from the fountain that appeared for a time over the wheel. Later, the empty cigarette package on the floor caught his eye and he filled it, along with the bottle that had held brandy. With his needs satisfied, he settled back, letting the ship forge lazily ahead.

A thousand feet below him, the water stretched on in apparent endlessness, but he was in no hurry. Aside from the pain in his head, the world was good, and that had become so much a part of his thoughts that he scarcely noticed it. The sun crept down slowly toward the horizon, slipping through the few cloud banks.

Something about that awakened a half memory in him; the sun was partly in the clouds, just touching the water, and sending out streamers of light. Somewhere he had seen that before, and a savage snarl came into his throat instinctively as his hand went up to the place where the hole had been in his forehead. A sun with fixed rays from it, painted on something—and a thing to be hated! He pinned the idea in his memory as darkness began slipping over the ocean, and he brought the ship to a stop, letting its wings hold it motionless over the sea. With the coming of night, there was no purpose in continuing his search, but he'd remember that banner if he found it during the day. In the meantime, he chose to eat and drink again, then curl himself up in the air and go to sleep.

It was a sharp spattering sound that brought him out of his sleep and sent him falling toward the floor of the cabin before he could catch his thoughts. Then another burst of sound came rushing toward him, and the side of the ship suddenly sprouted a series of holes like those he'd removed the day before, while metal slugs shot by over him. With an action governed by sheer conditioned reflex, he was up and into the control seat, wheeling the ship about before his mind had evaluated the stuation.

Ahead of him now appeared five ships of somewhat different design, all coming in sharply toward him. With part of his brain he deflected the all-pervading forces, cutting off the rain of bullets by denying to himself their ability to reach him or the ship. With the rest, he was trying to understand, and failing. In the thoughts of the little olive men out there he could read hatred, fear, and a desire to kill, though he had done nothing against them. Then the gently fluttering wings of his ship beat down savagely in response to his demands and threw him forward toward them.

Horror sprawled through the thoughts of his enemies, superstition accompanying it. For a split second they sat glued to their controls, eyes focused on his beating wings, and then lifted as one man and went streaking up and away. As they passed, he saw the device of the sun and rays on the planes, and the hatred he'd felt before welled over him, driving back all voluntary thought. The wings of his plane beat harder, drumming the air in resounding beats, but the ships were back at him again before he could rise, superstition still strong, but the desire to kill stronger.

Then his eyes lit on the gun controls, and memory stirred again, telling him that death came from such things. He gripped them fiercely, but nothing happened! With a frown he tried again, then drove his vision down and into the weapons to find there were none of the little metal slugs that should be there. And the shadow of memory reminded him that they had all been used before, when he'd been forced down onto the little island by such men as these. They—

The clouded mind refused to go on, but the hatred stirred and writhed inside him, even while the bullets came spattering toward him, broke against the barrier he still held, and went hurtling down uselessly. Then one of the other ships came swooping forward, straight toward him, its purpose of ramming him plain in the enemy's mind!

The guns *must* work! And then they were working. Little blue lights collected in drops and went scooting out toward the end of the guns, to streak forward in a straight line. He brought the sights up on the hurtling ship, and blue fire sped forward to meet it, to fuse with it, and to leave the air empty of both plane and light, only a thunderous sound remaining.

It was too much for the sons of the Rising Sun. A roar came from their motors and they dived under him, heading south in a group, the tumult of their propellers pitched to their highest limit. But he had no intention of letting them get away; they had attacked without warning, and they must pay.

His wings were beating the air savagely now, and he let the ship jerk around on its tail, heading after the four ships. The hate in his mind gripped at the forces about, driving him forward in a rush that left a constant clap of thunder behind him as the air came together again in his wake. But he had learned from the crushed bird, and held a cushion of air with him to save his ship. Then the four remaining ships were before his sights again, and the little blue drops coalesced and ran down the barrels to go scooting forward hungrily. The air was suddenly clear ahead of him.

Still his wings drummed on furiously. They had turned south, and in their minds had been the pictures of others of their kind in that direction. Very well, he would find them! At thirty thousand feet he leveled off and solidified a young roast turkey and a glass of water, but his face was grim as he ate, and his eyes were leveled at the sea below. The things he had seen in the mind of the enemy officer had been reason enough for their elimination, enough without the knowledge that there were others of his kind somewhere whom these little yellow men were killing and torturing, still others toward whom they were marshaling their might.

The blue drops of light ran together and formed into a bigger ball at the muzzle of one gun as he thought. Finally the ball dropped, jerking downward at a speed beyond the pull of gravity, and the ocean spouted up to meet it, then fell back in a boiling explosion that sent huge waves thundering outward. He paid it no attention, and the waves fell behind.

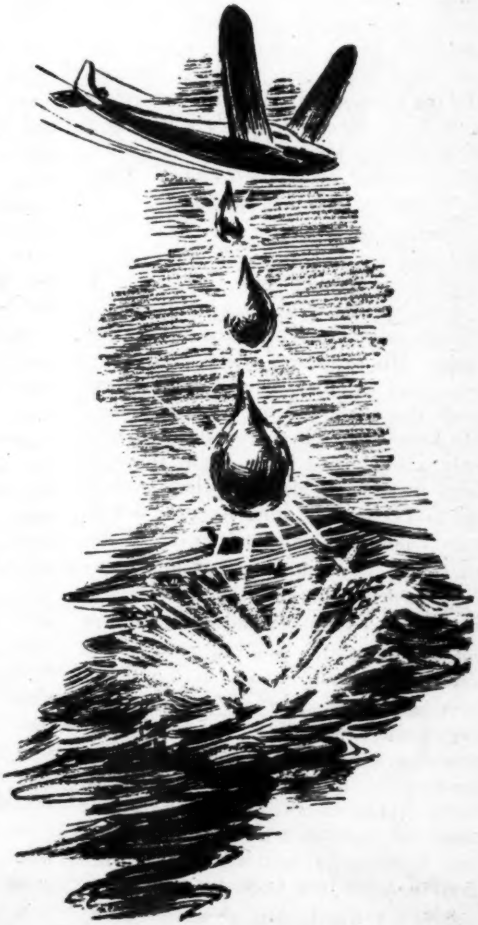
The last of the turkey was still in his fingers as he spied them below and near the horizon—a swarm of midges that must be planes, and below them larger objects that pushed over the water and left turbulent paths in the sea. There were many of them, moving slowly ahead, with the swarm of planes spread out to cover a great distance around them. He wasted no time in counting, but clutched the controls and sent his ship down in a swooping rush that brought the planes before his sights. The blue light gathered and went ahead, and he was rushing on through the space the enemy had occupied, questing for more. At first they were kind, and rallied into a group to meet him, but those that were left were wiser.

He swung in a great circle, taking them as he could find them, hoping that he could get them all before the last could disappear from his sight. Those that dropped down frantically toward the surface vessels below he disregarded, and seeing that, others dived. It was a matter of minutes until the air was clear, except for the larger missiles that came arching up from the craft on the sea.

One found him, and it carried more force than the bullets for which his shield was designed. He had only time to deflect it, and to throw a band of force around it before it exploded. Then it was gone, leaving a gaping hole on each side of the cabin, a couple of feet behind him. He knew that no shield he could control would protect him long against any great quantity of such, and lifted his wings upward, rising rapidly and collecting a reservoir of air about him to meet his needs in the level toward which he was climbing.

The vessels below were scattering now, and he noted staccato bursts of a wave force coming from them, but it was harmless and he guessed that it was was some kind of signal. The air about was filled with that force, too, though much weaker than the ships were sending out, but it seemed of no other use. He disregarded it, continuing up until sixty thousand feet stood between him and the force under him.

Then he tilted the nose of his ship, bringing it downward, and hung suspended while he let the blue light collect. From this height the sights were



useless, but there were other ways of controlling it; as each globe grew to the desired size, he released it, guiding it down with his mind, stopping it above the ships, and directing it toward the one he had chosen as a target. Even at the distance he remained, the chaos of terror below reached up to him, and he grinned savagely. There was some unknown debt he owed them, and he was paying it now. Ships were foundering in the waves that leaped from the disappearance of others, but he gave no heed to their condition as the blue globes dropped downward. And at last, reluctantly, he dropped to search for more prey and found them gone, except for two small boats that had been lowered and not harmed. In them the occupants were dead; the cosmic forces he had used were not too kind to living flesh when out of control, even at a distance. They were powers that molded suns.

Perhaps there were more ahead. He had had no time to glean information from their minds, but there was a chance, and he went on winging south, though more slowly, relaxed at the controls. His head was numb and heavy now, and he was covered with sweat from the efforts of the past half-hour. He knew that the energy he used was only a weak and insignificant thing, a faint impulse in his mind that reached out and controlled other forces which in turn modulated the great forces of the universe; they alone could yield the energy needed. But even the tiny catalytic fraction he supplied had drained him for the moment. And the pain in his head was worse.

A sudden flood of the signaling energy came to him then, and he grinned again; so it had been signals, now being answered! Much good it would do them. They came from the north this time, and he hesitated, but decided to go on. If there was nothing in this direction, he could turn back.

The sea was barren of surface craft, and the air was empty. Now, though, he was passing near islands at times, but he saw no signs of enemy flags there, and chose not to search for them through the jungles that covered them—that could wait until later. He lifted back upward to twenty thousand feet and went onward. And more islands began to appear, stirring uncomfortably at his mind, pushing the beginnings of pictures into his consciousness. Below, dots moved on the ocean, and he started down grimly, blue forming on his guns. Then an eddy of thought from them reached his mind, and he hesitated. Those were not the same people as the others, and the ships were carrying freight instead of weapons.

For seconds, he hung there, then went up again, well out of their sight, and altered his course westward, unsure of why, but knowing that the tugging of memory was his master. Islands appeared and went under his eyes, arousing only a passing notice, and twice groups of planes sped under him, but they were without the sun-device, and he let them go.

When the land appeared, finally, he sped over it, conscious of some familiarity, sure now that the impulse had been one of memory. He strained his vision until his eyes seemed to hang a few feet over the land, sent his gaze forward, and made out more planes, and some kind of landing field for them, with tents grouped around it. Men like himself were walking about, and a strip of cloth floated from a pole, striped in red and white, with a blue field carrying white pointed figures. Memory crowded forward, hesitated and retreated. He shook his head to clear it, and the pain that lurked there lanced out, throwing him to his knees and out of the control seat. He gripped the aching back of his skull and staggered up again, his eyes fixed on the flat, tugging at his brain for the thought that would not come.

But the pain always came first. And, finally, he forced his vision inward toward it, his lips grim with hatred of the feeling that refused to obey. Under his skull in the gray convolutions of his brain, a gory trail cleft through the center, exactly on the dividing line between the two halves, and ended in a little lead pellet, pressing against one curious section. Even when he forced the torn tissues of his brain together, and healed them, the pain went on. With a sudden mental wrench, he focused on the lead pellet—

Pain and bullet vanished, and Lieutenant Jack Sandler looked down at his landing field from a plane that was already beginning to come to pieces under him, its wings tilting crazily upward. For a moment he stood in the pitching ship, grasping at his senses. Then, with a grab that assured him his parachute was still buckled on, he forced himself out, miraculously avoiding a twisting wing by fractions of an inch, and waited until it was safe to open his chute. The cloth billowed out above him, and he was drifting downward, off to one side of his home field, with the ship already falling in pieces. It landed in the thick of the jungle far to the east, mere scrap metal, broken beyond recognition of any strangeness.

But his thoughts were not on the plane, then. He was realizing that he'd been gone three days, and trying to remember. There'd been the Zeros, streaking at him, and the hit that had killed his motor and forced it down on the islet. Jap planes had come down in savage disregard of all decency, machine-gunning his crippled plane, chewing off the face of Red, who'd been beside him, and whining by his ears as he'd managed a leap through the door. He must have been stunned by a bullet or by the fall, since he could remember only hazily making the ship fly again somehow and heading homeward. And, vaguely, of a fight on the way—

It didn't matter much, though. He'd made it, by a tight margin, and there would be a chance to get back at them after he reached his base again. Some day, the Japs would regret those little lead presents they'd been so willing to send down on a crippled plane and its occupants. They'd pay interest on those bullets.

The lieutenant landed then, released his parachute, and began forcing his way back to the camp to report for duty again. And far to the north, radios crackled and snapped in confusion that was tardily replaced by hasty assurances of another glorious victory by the fleet that had gone south to decide the war. But everywhere, the forces that had been so briefly disturbed went on their quiet ways as before, unnoticed, uncaring. They would be there, waiting, forever.

THE END.

PEPSI-COLA HITS THE SPOT!
GOOD!
GOOD!
GOOD!

Calling The Empress

by George O. Smith

The trick of interplanetary communication will be a neat bit of gadgetry—but when someone has to send a communicator beam to an infinitesimal mote like a spaceship lost in several hundred sextillion cubic miles of nothing, they'll have to pull a real trick!

Illustrated by Williams

The chart in the terminal building at Canalopsis Spaceport, Mars, was a huge thing that was the focus of all eyes. It occupied a thirty-by-thirty space in the center of one wall, and it had a far-flung iron railing about it to keep the people from crowding it too close, thus shutting off the view. It was a popular display, for it helped to drive home the fact that space travel was different from anything else. People were aware that their lives had been built upon going from one fixed place to another place, equally immobile. But in Interplanet travel one left a moving planet for another planet, moving at a different velocity. You found that the shortest distance was not a straight line but a space curve involving higher mathematics.

The courses being traveled at the time were marked, and those that would be traversed in the very near future were drawn upon the chart, too, all appropriately labeled. At a glance, one could see that in fifty minutes and seventeen seconds, the *Empress of Kolain* would take off from Mars, which was the red disk on the right; and she would travel along the curve so marked to Venus, which was almost one hundred and sixty degrees clockwise around the Sun. People were glad of the chance to go on this trip because the famous Relay Station would come within a telescope's sight on the way.

The *Empress of Kolain* would slide into Venus on the day side and a few hours later she would lift again to head for Terra, a few degrees ahead of Venus and about thirty million miles away.

Precisely on the zero-zero, the *Empress of Kolain* lifted upward on four tenuous pillars of dull-red glow and drove a hole in the sky. The glow was almost lost in the bright sunshine, and soon it died. The *Empress of Kolain* was a little world in itself, and would so remain until it dropped onto the ground at Venus, almost two hundred million miles away.

Driving upward, the *Empress of Kolain* could not have been out of the thin Martian atmosphere when a warning bell rang in the telephone and telespace office at the terminal. The bell caught official ears, and all work was stopped as the personnel of the communications office ran to the machine to see what was so important that the "immediate attention" signal was rung.

Impatiently the operator waited for the tape to come clicking from the machine. It came, letter by letter, click by click, at fifty words per minute. The operator tore the strip from the machine and read aloud: "Hold *Empress of Kolain*. Reroute to Terra direct. Will be quarantined at Venus. Whole planet in epidemic of Venusian Fever."

"Snap answer," growled Keg Johnson. "Tell 'em: 'Too little and too late. *Empress of Kolain* left thirty seconds before warning bell. What do we do now?' "

The operator's fingers clicked madly over the keyboard. Across space went the reply, across the void to the Relay Station. It ran through the Station's mechanism and went darting to Terra. It clicked out as sent in the offices of Interplanet Transport. A vice president read the message and swore roundly. He swore in three Terran languages, in the language of the Venusians, and even managed to visualize a few choice remarks from the Martian Pictographs that were engraved on the Temples of Canalopsis.

"Miss Deane," he yelled at the top of his voice. "Take a message! Shoot a line to Channing on Venus Equilateral. Tell him: *'Empress of Kolain* on way to Venus. Must be contacted and rerouted to Terra direct. Has million dollars' worth of Martian Line Moss aboard; will perish under quarantine. Spare no expense.' Sign that 'Williams, Interplanet.' "

"Yes, Mr. Williams," said the secretary. "Right away."

More minutes of light-fast communication. Out of Terra to Luna, across space to Venus Equilateral Relay Station, the nerve center of Interplanetary Communications. The machines clicked and tape cleared from the slot. It was pasted neatly on a sheet of official paper, stamped *rush* and put in a pneumatic tube.

As Don Channing began to read the message, Keg Johnson on Mars was chewing worriedly on his fourth fingernail, and Vice President Williams was working on his second. But Johnson had a head start and therefore would finish first. Both men knew that nothing more could be done. If Channing couldn't do it, nobody could.

Channing finished the 'gram and swore. It was a good-natured swear word, far from downright vilification, though it did consign certain items to the Nether Regions. He punched a button with some relish, and a rather good-looking woman entered. She smiled at him with more intimacy than a secretary should, and sat down.

"Arden, call Walt in, will you?"

Arden Wastphal smiled. "You might have done that yourself," she told him. She reached for the call button with her left hand, and the diamond on her fourth finger glinted like a pilot light.

"I know it," he answered, "but that wouldn't give me a chance to see you."

"Baloney," said Arden. "You just wait until next October. I'll be in your hair all the time then."

"By then I may be tired of you," said Channing with a smile. "But until then, take it or leave it." His face grew serious, and he tossed the message across the table to her. "What do you think of that?"

Arden read, and then remarked: "That's a huge order, Don. Think you can do it?"

"It'll cost plenty. I don't know whether we can contact a ship in space. It hasn't been done to date, you know, except for short distances."

The door opened without a knock and Walt Franks entered. "Billing and cooing?" he asked. "Why do you two need an audience?"

"We don't," answered Don. "This was business."

"For want of evidence, I'll believe that. What's the dope?"

"Walt, what are the chances of hooking up with the *Empress of Kolain,* which is en route from Mars to Venus?"

"About equal to a celluloid snowball —you know where," said Franks, looking slyly at Arden.

"Take off your coat, Walt. We've got a job."

"You mean— Hey! Remind me to quit Saturday."

"This is dead in earnest, Walt." Don told the electronics engineer all he knew.

"Boy, this is a job that I wouldn't want my life to depend on. In the first place, we can't beam a transmitter at them if we can't see 'em. And in the second place, if we did, they couldn't receive us."

"We can get a good idea of where they are and how they're going," said Channing. "That is common knowledge."

"Astronomy is an exact science," chanted Franks. "But by the time we figure out just where the *Empress of Kolain* is with respect to us at any given instant we'll all be old men with gray beards. She's crossing toward us on a skew curve—and we'll have to beam it past Sol. It won't be easy, Don. And then if we do find them, what do we do about it?"

"Let's find them first and then work out a means of contacting them afterward."

"Don," interrupted Arden, "what's so difficult?"

Franks fell backward into a chair. Don turned to the girl and asked: "Are you kidding?"

"No. I'm just ignorant. What is so hard about it. We shoot beams across a couple of hundred million miles like nothing and maintain communications at any cost. What should be so hard about contacting a ship?"

"In the first place, we can see a planet, and they can see us, so they can hold their beams. A spaceship might be able to see us, but they couldn't hold a beam on us because of the side sway. We couldn't see them until they are right upon us and so we could not hope to hold a beam on them. Spaceships *might* broadcast, but you have no idea what the square law of radiated power will do to a broadcast signal when millions upon millions of miles are counted in. A half million watts on any planet will not quite cover the planet as a service area on broadcast frequencies. On short waves it will because of the skip distance. But for square-law dissipation, you can't count skip distances—and in space it would be a case of the signal losing in strength according to the inverse square of the distance. So they don't try it. A spaceship may as well be on Rigel as far as contacting her in space goes.

"We might beam a wide-dispersion affair at them," continued Channing. "But it would be pretty thin by the time it got there. And, having no equipment, they couldn't hear us."

"May we amend that?" asked Franks. "They are equipped with radio. But the things are used only in landing operations where the distance is measured in miles, not Astronomical Units."

"O. K.," smiled Channing. "It's turned off during flight and we may consider the equipment as being nonexistent."

"And, according to the chart, we've got to contact them before the turnabout," offered Arden. "They must have time to deflect their course to Terra."

"You think of the nicest complications," said Channing. "I was just about to hope that we could flash them or grab at 'em with a skeeter. But we can't wait until they pass us."

"That will be the last hope," admitted Franks. "But say! Did any bright soul think of shooting a fast ship after them from Canalopis?"

"Sure. The answer is the same as Simple Simon's answer to the Pieman: Alas, they haven't any!"

"No use asking why," growled Franks. "O. K., Don, we'll go after 'em. I'll have the crew set up a couple of mass detectors at either end of the station. We'll triangulate, and calculate, and hope to hit the right correction factor. We'll find them and keep them in line. You figure out a means of contacting them, huh?"

"*I'll* set up the detectors and *you* find the means," suggested Don.

"No go. You're the director of communications."

Don sighed a false sigh. "Arden, hand me my electronics text," he said.

"And shall I wipe your fevered brow?" cooed Arden.

"Leave him alone," directed Franks. "You distract him."

"It seems to me that you two are taking this rather lightly," said Arden.

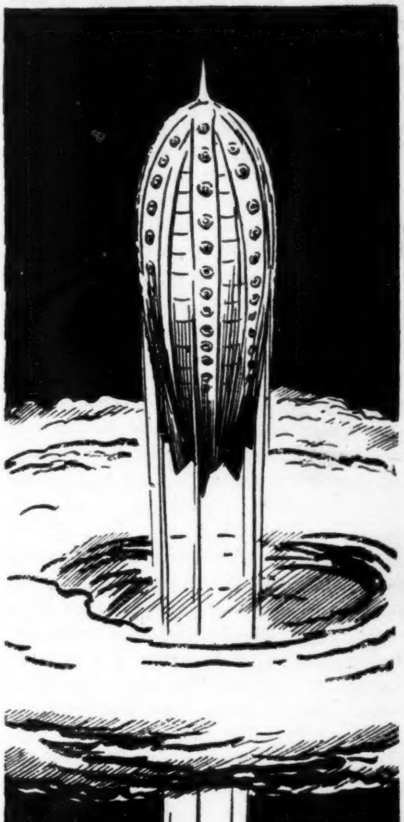
"What do you want us to do? Get down on the floor and chew on the rug? You know us better than that. If we can find the answer to contacting a spaceship in flight, we'll add another flower to our flag. But we can't do it by clawing through the first edition of Henney's 'Handbook of Radio Engineering.' It will be done by the seat of our pants if at all; a pair of sidecutters and a spool of wire, a hunk of string and a lump of solder, a—"

"A rag, a bone, and a hank of hair?" asked Franks.

"Leave Kipling out of this. He didn't have to cover the whole Solar System. So let's get cooking."

Don and Walt left the office just a trifle on the fast side. Arden looked after them, out through the open door, shaking her head until she remembered something that she could do. She smiled and went to her typewriter and pounded out a message back to Williams at Interplanet. It read: "Channing and Franks at work on contacting the *Empress of Kolain*. Will do our best." And she signed it: "Venus Equilateral."

Unknowing of the storm, the *Empress of Kolain* sped silently through the void, accelerating constantly at one gee. Hour after hour she was adding to her



velocity, building it up to a speed that would make the trip in days, and not weeks. Her drivers flared dull red no more, for there was not atmosphere for the electronic stream to excite. Her few portholes sparkled with light, but they were nothing in comparison to the starry curtain of the background.

Her hull was of a neutral color, and though the sun glanced from her metal flanks, a reflection from a convex side is not productive of a beam of light. It spreads according to the degree of convexity and is soon lost.

What constitutes an apparent absence? The answer to that question is the example of a ship in space flight. The *Empress of Kolain* did not radiate anything detectable in the electromagnetic scale from ultralong waves to ultrahigh frequencies; nothing at all that could be detected at any distance beyond a few thousand miles. The sweep of her meteor-spotting equipment would pass a spot in micro-seconds at a hundred miles; at the distance from the Relay Station, the sweep of the beam would be curved like the stream of water from a swung hose and therefore useless for direction finding, even though the Station's excellent equipment could pick up the signal. And so fleeting would be the touch of the spotting beam that the best equipment ever known or made would have no time to react, thus marking the signal.

Theorists claim a thing unexistent if it cannot be detected. The *Empress of Kolain* was invisible. It was undetectable to radio waves. It was in space, so no physical wave could be transmitted to be depicted as sound. Its mass was inconsiderable. Its size was comparatively sub-microscopic, and therefore it would occult few, if any, stars. Therefore, to all intents and purposes, the *Empress of Kolain* was nonexistent, and would remain in that state of material-non-being until it came to life again upon its landing at Venus.

Yet the *Empress of Kolain* existed in the minds of the men who were to find her. Like the shot unseen, fired from a distant cannon, the *Empress of Kolain* was coming at them with evermounting velocity, its unseen course a theoretical curve.

And the ship, like the projectile, would land if the men who knew of her failed in their purpose.

Don Channing and Walt Franks found their man in the combined dining room and bar—the only one in many million miles. They surrounded him, ordered a sandwich and beer, and began to tell him their troubles.

Charles Thomas listened for about three minutes. "Boy," he grinned, "being up in that shiny, plush-lined office has sure done plenty to your think-tank, Don."

Channing stopped talking. "Proceed," he said. "In what way has my perspective been warped."

"You talk like Burbank," said Thomas, mentioning a sore spot of some months past. "You think a mass detector would work at this distance? Nuts, fellow. It might, if there were nothing else in the place to interfere. But you want to shoot out near Mars. Mars is on the other side of the Sun—an Evening Star to anyone on Terra. You want us to shoot a slap-happy beam like the mass detector out past Sol; and then a hundred and forty million miles beyond in the faint hope that you can triangulate upon a little mite of matter; a stinking six hundred-odd feet of aluminum hull mostly filled with air and some machinery and so on. Brother, what do you think all the rest of the planets will do to your little piddling beam? Retract, or perhaps abrogate the law of universal gravitation?"

"Crushed," said Franks with a sorry attempt at a smile.

"Phew!" agreed Channing. "Maybe I should know more about mass detectors."

"Forget it," said Charles. "The only thing that mass detectors are any good for is to conjure up beautiful bubble dreams, which anybody who knows about 'em can break with the cold point of icy logic."

"What would you do?" asked Channing.

"Darned if I know. We might flash 'em with a big mirror—if we had a big mirror and they weren't heading right into the Sun."

"Let's see," mused Franks, making tabulations on the tablecloth. They're a couple of hundred million miles away. In order that your mirror present a recognizable disk, it should be about twice the diameter of Venus as seen from Terra. That's eight thousand miles in—at best visibility—say, eighty million or a thousand-to-one ratio. The *Empress of Kolain* is heading at us from some two hundred million, so at a thousand-to-one ratio our mirror would have to be twenty thousand miles across. Some mirror!"

Don tipped Walt's beer over the edge of the table, and while the other man was busy mopping up and muttering unprintables, Don said to Thomas: "This is serious and it isn't. Nobody's going to lose their skin if we don't, but a problem has been put to us and we're going to crack it if we have to skin our teeth to do it."

"You can't calculate their position?"

"Sure. Within a couple of thousand miles we can. That isn't close enough."

"No, it isn't," agreed Chuck.

Silence fell for a minute. It was broken by Arden, who came in waving a telegram. She sat down and appropriated Channing's glass, which had not been touched. Don opened the sheet and read: "Have received confirmation of your effort. I repeat, spare no expense!" It was signed: "Williams, Interplanet."

"Does that letter offer mean anything to you?" asked Arden.

"Sure," agreed Don. "But at the time we're stumped. Should we be doing something?"

"Anything, I should think, would be better than what you're doing at present. Or does that dinner-and-beer come under the term 'Expenses'?"

Arden stood up, tossed Channing's napkin at him, and started toward the door. Channing watched her go, his hand making motions on the tablecloth. His eyes fell to the table and he took Franks' pencil and drew a long curve from a spot of gravy on one side of the table to a touch of coffee stain on the other. The curve went through a bit of grape jelly near the first stain.

"Here goes the tablecloth strategist," said Franks. "What now, little man?"

"That spot of gravy," explained Don, "is Mars. The jelly is the *Empress of Kolain*. Coffee stain is Venus, and up here by this cigarette burn is Venus Equilateral. Get me?"

"Yop, that's clear enough."

"Now it would be the job for seventeen astronomers for nine weeks to predict the movement of the jelly spot with respect to the usual astral standards. But, fellows, we know the acceleration of the *Empress of Kolain*, and we know her position with respect to the orbit of Mars at the instant of take-off. We can correct for Mars' advance along her—or his—orbit. We can figure the position of the *Empress of Kolain* from her angular distance from Mars! That's the only thing we need know. We don't give a ten-dollar damn about her true position."

Channing began to write equations on the tablecloth. "You see, they aren't moving so fast with respect to us. The course is foreshortened as they are coming almost in line with Venus Equilateral, curving outward and away from the Sun. Her course, as we see it from the Station here, will be a long radius upward curve, slightly on the parabolic side. Like all long-range cruises, the *Empress of Kolain* will heist herself slightly above the plane of the ecliptic to avoid the swarm of meteors that follow about the Sun in the same plane as the planets, lifting the highest at the point of greatest velocity."

"I get it," said Franks. "We get the best beam controller we have to keep the planet on the cross hairs. We apply a spiral cam to advance the beam along the orbit. Right?"

"Right." Don sketched a conical section on the tablecloth and added dimensions. He checked his dimensions against the long string of equations, and nodded. "We'll drive this cockeyed-looking cam with an isochronic clock, and then squirt a beam out there. Thank the Lord for the way our beam transmitters work."

"You mean the effect of reflected waves?" asked Chuck.

"Sure. They're like light—only they ain't. We're going to use a glorified meteor detector. We'll control the spread and dispersion so that we cover a healthy hundred miles or so, which will give us sufficient power, I believe. If not, we'll have to tighten the beam. At any rate, spreading from a point source to an object of a given dimension, the waves rebound as though the object were a plane mirror. That will give us a dispersion of twice the dimension of the *Empress of Kolain's* planar projection through this axis. Twelve hundred feet isn't much, but once we get her on the beam and have confirmation, we can forget the rebound. We'll have her pinned."

"And then?" asked Franks.

"Then we will have left the small end, which I'll give to you, Walt, so that you can have part of the credit."

Walt shook his head. "The easy part," he said uncheerfully. "By which you mean the manner in which we contact them and make them listen to us?"

"That's her," said Don with a cheerful smile.

"Fine!" said Thomas. "Now what do we do?"

"Clear up this mess so we can make the cam. This drawing will do, just grab the tablecloth."

Joe, the operator of Equilateral's one and only establishment for the benefit of the stomach, came up as the three men began to move their glasses and dishes over to an empty table. "What makes with the tablecloth?" he asked. "Don't you want a piece of carbon paper and another tablecloth?"

"No," said Don nonchalantly. "This single copy will do."

"We lose lots of tablecloths that way," said Joe. "It's tough, running a restaurant on Equilateral. I tried using paper ones once, but that didn't work. I had 'em printed, but when the Solar System was on 'em, you fellows drew schematic diagrams for a new coupler circuit. I put all kinds of radio circuits on them, and the gang drew plans for antenna arrays. I gave up and put pads of paper on each table, and the boys used them to make folded paper airplanes and they shot them all over the place. Why don't you guys grow up?"

"Cheer up, Joe. But if this tablecloth won't run through the blueprint machine, we'll squawk!"

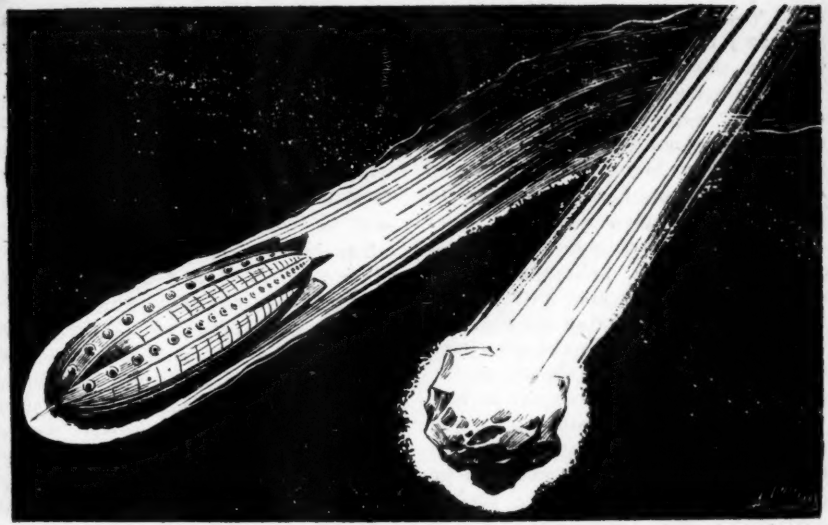
Joe looked downcast, and Franks hurried to explain: "It isn't that bad, Joe. We won't try it. We just want to have these figures so we won't have to run through the math again. We'll return the cloth."

"Yeah," said Joe at their retreating figures. "And for the rest of its usefulness it will be full of curves, drawings, and a complete set of astrogating equations." He shrugged his shoulders and went for a new tablecloth.

Don, Walt, and Charles took their improvised drawing to the machine shop, where they put it in the hands of the master mechanic.

"This thing has a top requirement," Don told him. "Make it as quick as you can."

Master Mechanic Walton took the cloth and said: "You forgot the note. You know, 'Work to dimensions shown, do not scale this drawing.' Lord, Don, this silly-looking cam will take a man about six hours to do. It'll have to



be right on the button all over, no tolerance. I'll have to cut it to the 'T' and then lap it smooth with polishing compound. Then what'll you test it on?"

"Sodium light interferometer. Can you do it in four hours?"

"If nothing goes wrong. Brass all right?"

"Anything you say. It'll only be used once. Anything of sufficient hardness to withstand a single usage will do."

"I'll use brass then. Or free-cutting steel may be better. If you make it soft you have the chance of cutting too much off with your lapping compound. We'll take care of it, Don. The rest of this stuff isn't too hard. Your framework and so on can be whittled out and pasted together from standard girders, right?"

"Sure. Plaster them together any way you can. And we don't want them painted. As long as she works, phooey to the looks."

"Fine," said Walton. "I'll have the business installed in the Beam Control Room in nine hours. Complete and ready to work."

"That nine hours is a minimum?"

"Absolutely. After we cut and polish that screwball cam, we'll have to check it, and then you'll have to check it. Then the silly thing will have to be installed and it's concentricity must be checked to the last wave length of cadmium light. That'll take us a couple of hours, I bet. The rest of the works will be ready, checked, and waiting for the ding-busted cam."

"Yeah," agreed Franks. "Then we'll have to get up there with our works and put the electricals on the mechanicals. My guess, Don, is a good, healthy twelve hours before we can begin to squirt our signal."

Twelve hours is not much in the life of a man; it is less in the life of a planet. The Terrain standard of gravity is so small that it is expressed in feet per second. But when the two are coupled together as a measure of travel, and the standard Terran gee is applied for twelve hours steady, it builds up to almost three hundred miles per second, and by the end of that twelve hours, six million miles have fled into the past.

Now take a look at Mars. It is a

small, red mite in the sky, its diameter some four thousand miles. Sol is eight hundred thousand miles in diameter. Six million miles from Mars, then, can be crudely expressed by visualizing a point eight times the diameter of the Sun away from Mars, and you have the distance that the *Empress of Kolain* had come from Mars.

But the ship was heading in at an angle, and the six million miles did not subtend the above arc. From Venus Equilateral, the position of the *Empress of Kolain* was more like two diameters of the Sun from Mars, slightly to the north and on the side away from Sol.

It may sound like a problem for the distant future, this pointing a radio beam at a planet, but it is no different than Galileo's attempts to see Jupiter through his Optik Glass. Of course, it has had refinements that have enabled men to make several hundred hours of exposure of a star on a photographic plate. So if men can maintain a telescope on a star, night after night, to build up a faint image, they can also maintain a beamed transmission wave on a planet.

All you need is a place to stand; a firm, immobile platform. The three-mile-long, one-mile-diameter mass of Venus Equilateral offered such a platform. It rotated smoothly, and upon its 'business' end a hardened and highly polished set of rails maintained projectors that were pointed at the planets. These were parabolic reflectors that focused ultra-high-frequency waves into tight beams which were hurled at Mars, Terra, and Venus for communication.

And because the beams were acted upon by all of the trivia in the Solar System, highly trained technicians stood their tricks at the beam controls, correcting by sensitive verniers any deviation of the beams. In fifty million miles, even the bending of electromagnetic waves by the Sun's mass had to be considered. Sunspots made known their presence. And the vagaries of land transmission were present in a hundred ways due to the distance and the necessity of concentrating every milliwatt of available power on the target.

This problem of the *Empress of Kolain* was different. Spaceships were invisible, therefore the beam-control man must sight on Mars and the mechanical cam would keep the ship in sight of the beam.

The hours went past in a peculiar mixture of speed and slowness. On one hand the minutes sped by swiftly and fleetingly, each tick of the clock adding to the lost moments, never to be regained. Time, being precious, seemed to slip through their fingers like sifting sand.

On the other hand, the time that must be spent in preparation of the equipment went slow. Always it was in the future, that time when their experiment must either prove a success or a failure. Always there was another hour of preparatory work before the parabolic reflector was mounted; and then another hour before it swung freely and perfectly in its new mounting. Then the minutes were spent in anticipation of the instant that the power stage of the transmitter was tested and the megawatts of ultra-high-frequency energy poured into the single rod that acted as a radiator.

It was a singularly disappointing sight. The rod glowed not, and the reflector was the same as it was before the rod drew power. But the meters read and the generators moaned, and the pyrometers in the insulators mounted as the losses converted the small quantity of energy into heat. But the rod drew power, and the parabolic reflector beamed that power into a tight beam and hurled it out on a die-true line.

Invisible power that could be used in communications.

Then the cam was installed. The time went by even slower then, because the cam must be lapped and polished to absolute perfection, not only of its own surface but to absolute concentricity to the shaft on which it turned.

But eventually the job was finished, and the men stood back, their eyes expectantly upon Don Channing and Walt Franks.

Don spoke to the man chosen to control the beam. "You can start any time now. Keep her knifed clean, if you can."

The man grinned at Channing. "If the devils that roam the void are with us we'll have no trouble. We should all pray for a phrase used by some characters in a magazine I read once: 'Clear ether!' We could use some right now."

He applied his eyes to the telescope. He fiddled with the verniers for a brief time, made a major adjustment on a larger handwheel, and then said, without removing his eye from the 'scope, "That's it, Dr. Channing."

Don answered: "O. K., Jim, but you can use the screen now. We aren't going to make you squint through that pipe for the next few hours straight."

"That's all right. I'll use the screen as soon as we can prove we're right. Ready?"

"Ready," said Channing.

Franks closed a tiny switch. Below, in the transmitter room, relays clicked and heavy-duty contacts closed with blue fire. Meters began to climb upward across their scales, and the generators moaned in a descending whine. A shielded monitor began to glow, indicating that full power was vomiting from the mouth of the reflector.

And out from the projector there went, like a spearhead, a wavefront of circularly polarized microwaves. Die-true they sped, crossing the void like a line of sight to an invisible spot above Mars and to the left. Out past the Sun, where they bent inward just enough to make Jim's job tough. Out across the open sky they sped at the velocity of light, and taking sixteen minutes to get there.

Would it—or wouldn't it?

A half-hour passed. "Now," said Channing. "Are we?"

Ten minutes went by. The receiver was silent save for a constant crackle of cosmic static.

Fifteen minutes passed.

"Nuts," said Channing. "Could it be that we aren't quite hitting them?"

"Could be," admitted Franks. "Jim, waggle that beam a bit, and slowly. When we hit 'em, we'll know it because we'll hear 'em a half-hour later. Take it easy and slowly. We've used up thirteen of our fifty-odd hours. We can use another thirty or so just in being sure."

Jim began to make the beam roam around the invisible spot in the sky. He swept the beam in microscopic scans, up and down, and advancing the beam by one half of its apparent width at the receiver for each sweep.

Two more hours went by. The receiver was still silent of reflected signals.

It was a terrific strain, this necessary wait of approximately a half-hour between each minor adjustment and the subsequent knowledge of failure. Jim gave up the 'scope because of eyestrain, and though Don and Walt had confidence that the beam-control man was competent to use the cross-ruled screen to keep Mars on the beam, Jim was none too sure of himself, and so he kept checking the screen against the 'scope.

At the end of the next hour of abject failure, Walt Franks began to scribble on a pad of paper. Don came over to peer over Franks' shoulder, and because he couldn't read Walt's mind, he was forced to ask what the engineer was calculating.

"I've been thinking," said Franks.

"Beginner's luck?" asked Don with a wry smile.

"I hope not. Look, Don, we're moving on the orbit of Venus, at Venus' orbital velocity. Oh, all right, say it scientifical: We're all three, Venus, Sol, and Venus Equilateral, at the corners of an equilateral triangle, and will forever remain, barring outside influences. So that means we're running around a common point, the common center of gravity—which can be construed to mean that we are circling Sol at Venus' speed, or twenty-one point seven five miles per second. Now our beam is curved because of the angular velocity, just like a swung hose. However, it hits the *Empress of Kolain* at an angle as though we were a couple of thousand feet away. That's fine. But the reflected wave starts back at that angle, right back through the beam, remember?"

"I get it!" shouted Don in glee. "Thirty-two seconds at twenty-one point seven miles per second gives us seven hundred and sixteen miles to the rear. Walt, get your mechanical gang to hitch us up a couple of mirrors—say a yard in diameter. Put 'em so that they can be used as a range finder. Set the angles for seven hundred and sixteen miles; a three-mile base line should do it, I'm sure; and then we'll shoot us a skeeter out there with a detector. Get carving!"

"Shall Jim stop?" asked Walt.

"How long will it take to rig us a range finder?"

"Hour, God willing."

"Jim, get a relief for a half-hour. We'll keep the beam centered. Then he can take over when the going gets critical again."

The mounting of two mirrors at either end of Venus Equilateral gave little trouble. It was the amount of detailed work that consumed the time. There were girders to be cut and welded together. The hundred-odd doorways that centered on the axis of Venus Equilateral had to be opened and the clear, light path had to be cleared of packing cases, supplies, and in a few cases machinery had to be partially dismantled to clear the way. A good portion of Venus Equilateral's personnel of three thousand were taken off of their jobs, haled out of bed for the emergency, or made to work through their play period, depending upon which shift they worked.

The machinery could be replaced, the central storage places could be refilled, and the many doors closed again. But the central room containing the air plant was no small matter. Channing took a sad look at the lush growth of Martian saw grass and sighed. It was growing nicely now, they had nurtured it into lusty growth from mere sprouts in trays and it was as valuable—precisely—as the lives of the three thousand-odd that lived, loved, and pursued happiness on Venus Equilateral. It was a youthful plant, a replacement brought in a tearing hurry from Mars to replace the former plant that was heaved into the incinerator by a well-meaning but ignorant man who thought that an air plant must be huge, moving levers, whirling gears, bubbling retorts, and a sprig of parsley.

Channing closed his eyes and shuddered in mock horror. "Chop out the center," he said.

The "center" meant the topmost fronds of the long blades; their roots were embedded in the trays that filled the cylindrical floor. Some of the blades would die—Martian saw grass is tender in spite of the wicked spines that line the edge—but this was an emergency with a capital E.

Cleaning the centermost channel out of the station was no small job. The men who put up Venus Equilateral had no idea that someone would be using the station for a sighting tube some day. The many additions to the station through the years made the layout as regular and as well-planned as the Mammoth Cave in Kentucky.

So for hour upon hour, men swarmed in the central, weightless channel and wielded acetylene torches, cutting steel. Not in all cases, but there were many. In three miles of storage rooms, a lot of doors and bulkheads can be thrown up without crowding the size of the individual rooms.

Channing spoke into the microphone

at the North end of Venus Equilateral, and said: "Walt? We've got a sight. Can you see?"

"Yop," said Walt. "And say, what happens to me after that bum guess?"

"That was quite a stretch, Walt. That 'hour, God willing,' worked itself into four hours, God help us."

"O. K., so I was optimistic. I thought that those doors were all on the center line."

"They are supposed to be, but they aren't huge and a little misalignment can do a lot of light-stopping. Can we juggle mirrors now?"

"Sure as shooting. Is Freddy out in the flitter?"

"He says he is guessing that he is at the right distance now. I'm set at a right angle now"—Don began to fumble through a volume of Vega's "Logarithms and Trigonometrical Functions"—"eighty-nine degrees, forty-five minutes, and forty seconds. Can you set your mirror that close?"

"Nope," answered Walt without a qualm. "Not a chance. I can hit it about ten seconds plus or minus, though."

"Make it plus nothing, minus twenty," said Don. "I was playing by ear, this time on account of my slipstick is busted."

"Such a lot of chatter," returned Walt, "don't mean a thing. While you've been gabbing about your prowess with a busted slide rule I've been setting my glass. You can cook with glass now."

"Brother," groaned Channing, "if I had one of those death rays that the boys were crowing about back in the days before space hopping became anything but a bit of fiction, I'd scorch your ears—or burn 'em off—or blow holes in you—or disintegrate you—depending on what stories you read. I haven't heard such a lousy pun in seventeen years— Hey, Freddy, you're a little close. Run out a couple of miles, huh?—and, Walt, I've heard some doozies."

There was a click in the phones and a cheerful voice chimed in with: "Good morning, fellows? What's with the Great Quest?"

Channing answered, "Hi, Babe. Been snoozing?"

"Sure, as any sensible person would. Have you been up all the time?"

"Yeah. We're still up against the main trouble with telephones—the big trouble, same as back in 1877—our friends have no telephone! You'd be surprised how elusive a spaceship can be in the deep. Sort of a nonexistent, microscopic speck, floating in absolutely nothing. We have a good idea of where they should be, and possibly why and what—but we're really playing with blindfolds, handcuffs, ear plugs, mufflers, nose clamps, and tongue-ties. I am reminded— Hey, Freddie, lift her north about three hundred yards—of the two blind men."

"Never mind the blind men," came back the pilot. "How'm I doing?"

"Fine. Slide out another hundred yards and hold her there."

"Who—me? Listen, Dr. Channing, you're the bird on the tapeline. You have no idea just how insignificant you look from seven hundred and sixteen miles away. Put a red-hot on the 'finder and have 'im tell me where the ship sits!"

"O. K., Freddy, you're on the beam and I'll put a guy on here to give you the dope. Right?"

"Right!"

"Right," echoed Arden. "And I'm going to bring you a slug of coffee and a roll. Or did you remember to eat recently?"

"We didn't," chimed in Walt.

"You get your own girl," snorted Channing. "And besides, you are needed up here. We've got work to do."

Once again the signal lashed out. The invisible waves drove out and began their swift run across the void. Time, as it always did during the wait-

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ing periods, hung like a Sword of Damocles. The half-hour finally ticked away, and Freddy called in: "No dice. She's as silent as the grave."

Minutes added together into an hour. The concentric wave left the reflector and just dropped out of sight.

"Too bad you can't widen her out," suggested Don.

"I'd like to tighten it down," objected Walt. "I think we're losing power and we can't increase the power—but we could tighten the beam."

"Too bad you can't wave it back and forth like a fireman squirting water on a lawn," said Arden.

"Firemen don't water lawns—" began Walt Franks, but he was interrupted by a wild yell from Channing.

"Something hurt?" asked Arden.

"No. Walt, we can wave the beam."

"Until we find 'em? We've been trying that. No worky."

Freddy called in excitedly: "Something went by just now and I don't think it was Christmas!"

"We might have hit 'em a dozen times in the last ten minutes and we'll never know it," said Channing. But the spaceliners can be caught. Let's shoot at them like popping ducks. Shotgun effect. Look, Walt, we can electronically dance the beam at a high rate of speed, spraying the neighborhood. Freddy can hear us return because we have to hit them all the time and the waver coming on the way back will pass through his position again and again. We'll set up director elements in the reflector, distorting the electrical surface of the parabolic reflector. That'll divert the beam. By making the phases swing right, we can scan the vicinity of the *Empress of Kolain* like a flying-spot television camera."

Walt turned to one of the technicians and explained. The man nodded. He left for Franks' laboratory and Walt turned back to his friends.

"Here shoots another couple of hours. I, for one, am going to grab forty winks."

Jim, the beam-control man, sat down and lighted a cigarette. Freddy let his flitter coast free. And the generators that fed the powerful transmitter came whining to a stop. But there was no sleep for Don and Walt. They kept awake to supervise the work, and to help in hooking up the phase-splitting circuit that would throw out-of-phase radio frequency into the director-elements to swing the beam.

Then once again the circuits were set up. Freddy found the position again and began to hold it. The concentric beam hurled out again, and as the phase-shift passed from element to element, the beam swept through an infinitesimal arc that covered thousands of miles of space by the time the beam reached the position occupied by the *Empress of Kolain.*

Like a painter, the beam painted in a swipe a few hundred miles wide and swept back and forth, each sweep progressing ahead of the stripe before by less than its width. It reached the end of its arbitrary wall and swept back to the beginning again, covering space as before. Here was no slow, irregular swing of mechanical reflector, this was the electronically controlled wavering of a stable antenna.

And this time the half-hour passed slowly but not uneventfully. Right on the tick of the instant, Freddy called back: "Got 'em."

It was a weakling beam that came back in staccato surges. A fading, wavering, spotty signal that threatened to lie down on the job and sleep. It came and it went, often gone for seconds and never strong for so much as an instant. It vied, and almost lost completely, with the constant crackle of cosmic static. It fought with the energies of the Sun's corona and was more than once the underdog. Had this returning beam carried intelligence of any sort it would have been wasted. About all that could be carried on a beam as sorry as this was the knowledge that there was a transmitter—and that it was transmitting.

But its raucous note synchronized with the paint-brush wiping of the transmitter. There was no doubt.

Don Channing put an arm around Arden's waist and grinned at Walt Franks. "Go to work, genius. I've got the *Empress of Kolain* on the pipe. You're the bright-eyed lad that is going to wake 'em up! We've shot almost twenty hours of our allotted fifty. Make with the megacycles, Walter. Arden and I will take in a steak, a moom pitcher, and maybe a bit of woo. Like?" he asked the girl.

"I like," she answered.

Walt Franks smiled and stretched lazily. He made no move to the transmitter. "Don't go away," he cautioned them. "Better call up Joe and order beer and sandwiches for the boys in the back room. On you!"

"Make with the signals first," said Channing. "And lay off the potables until we finish this silly job."

"You've got it. Is there a common, garden variety, transmitting key in the place?"

"Probably. We'll have to ask. Why?"

"Ask me."

Don removed his arm from Arden's waist. He picked up a spanner and advanced upon Franks.

"No!" objected Arden. "Poison him—I can't stand the sight of blood. Or better, bamboo splinters under the fingernails. He knows something simple, the big bum!"

"Beer and sandwiches?" asked Walt.

"Beer and sandwiches," agreed Don. "Now, Tom Swift, what gives?"

"I want to key the inner component of the beam. Y' see, Don, we're using the same frequency, by a half dozen megacycles, as their meteor spotter. I'm going to retune the inner beam to their frequency and key it. Realize what'll happen?"

"Sure," agreed Don, "but you're still missing the boat. You can't transmit keyed intelligence with an intermittent contact."

"In words, what do you mean, Don?"

"International Code is a series of dots and dashes, you may know. Our wabbling beam is whipping through the area in which the *Empress of Kolain* is passing. Therefore the contact is intermittent. And how could you tell a dot from a dash?"

"Easy," bragged Walt Franks. "We're not limited as to the speed of deviation, are we?"

"Yes—limited by the speed of the selsyn motors that transfer the phase-shifting circuits to the director radiators. Yeah, I get it, Edison, and we can wind them up to a happy six or eight thousand r. p. m. Six would get us a hundred cycles per second—a nice, low growl."

"And how will they receive that kind of signal on the meteor spotter?" asked Arden.

"The Officer of the Day will be treated to the first meteor on record that has intermittent duration—it is there only when it spells in International Code!"

Prying the toy transmitting key from young James Burke was a job only surpassed in difficulty by the task of opening the vault of the Interplanetary Bank after working hours. But Burke, Junior, was plied with soda pop, ice cream and candy. He was threatened, cajoled, and finally bribed. And what Interplanetary Communications paid for the toy finally would have made the manufacturer go out and look for another job. But Walt Franks carried the key to the scene of operations and set it on the bench to look at it critically.

"A puny gadget, at that," he said, clicking the key. "Might key a couple of hundred watts with it—but not too long. She'd go up like a skyrocket under our load!"

Walt opened a cabinet and began to pull out parts. He piled several parts on a bread board, and in an hour had a very husky thyraton hooked into a circuit that was simplicity itself. He hooked the thyraton into the main power circuit and tapped the key gingerly. The transmitter followed the keyed thyraton and Don took a deep breath.

"Do you know code?" he asked.

"Used to. Forgot it when I came to Venus Equilateral. Used to hold a ham ticket on Terra. But there's no use in hamming on the station here where you can work somebody by yelling at the top of your voice. The thing to ask is, 'Does anybody know code on board the *Empress of Kolain?*'"

They forgot their keying circuit and began to adjust the transmitter to the frequency used by the meteor spotter. It was a job. But it was done, all the way from the master oscillator stage through the several frequency doubler stages and to the big power-driver stage. The output stage came next, and then a full three hours of tinkering with files and hacksaws were required to adjust the length of the main radiator and the director elements so that their length became right for the changed frequency.

Finally Walt took the key and said: "Here goes!"

He began to rattle the key. In the power room, the generators screamed and the lights throughout the station flickered just a bit at the sudden surges.

Don Channing said to Arden: "If someone on the *Empress of Kolain* can understand code—"

The *Empress of Kolain* was zipping along in its silent passage through the void. It was an unseen, undetected, unaware bit of human manufacture marking man's will among the stars. In all the known universe it moved against the forces of celestial mechanics because some intelligent mote that infested the surface of a planet once had a longing to visit the stars. In all the Solar System, most of the cosmic stuff was larger than it—but it alone defied the natural laws of space.

Because it alone possessed the required *outside force* spoken of in Newton's "Universal Laws."

And it was doing fine.

Dinner was being served in the dining room. A group of shapely girls added grace to the swimming pool on the promenade deck. The bar was filled with a merry crowd which in turn were partly filled with liquor. A man in uniform, the Second Officer, was throwing darts with a few passengers in the playroom, and there were four oldish ladies on sabbatical leave who were stricken with *mal-de-void.*

The passage up to now had been uneventful. A meteor or two had come to make the ship swing a bit—but the swerve was less than the pitch of an ocean vessel in a moderate sea and it did not continue as did an ocean ship. Most of the time the *Empress of Kolain* seemed as steady as solid rock.

Only the First Officer, on the bridge, and the Chief Pilot, far below in the control room, knew just how erratic their course truly was. But they were not worried. They were not a shell, fired from a gun; they were a spaceship, capable of steering themselves into any port on Venus when they arrived and the minute wobbulations in their course could be corrected when the time came. For nothing that had come across the universe yet had ever prevented the ship of space from seeing where it was going.

Yes, it was uneventful.

Then the meteor screen flashed into life. A circle of light appeared in the celestial dome and the ship automatic pilot swerved ever so little. The dot of light was gone.

Throughout the ship, people laughed nervously. A waiter replaced a glass of water that had been set too close to the edge of the table and a manly-looking fellow dived into the swimming pool to haul a good-looking blonde back to the edge again. She'd been in the middle of a swan dive when the swerve came and the ship had swerved without her. The resounding smack of feminine stomach against the water was of greater importance than the meteor, now so many hundred miles behind.

The flash of light returned and the ship swerved again. Upon the third swerve, the First Officer was watching the celestial globe with suspicion. He went white. It was conceivable that the *Empress of Kolain* was about to encounter a meteor shower.

And that was bad.

He marked the place and set his observation telescope in synchronism with the celestial globe. There was nothing but the ultimate starry curtain in the background. He snapped a switch and the voice of the pilot came out of a speaker in the wall.

"You called, Mr. Hendall?"

"Tony, take the levers, will you please? Something is rotten in the State of Denmark."

"O. K., sir, I'm riding personal."

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"Kick out the meteor-spotter coupling circuits and forget the alarm."

"Right, Mr. Hendall, but will you confirm that in writing?"

Hendall scribbled on the telautograph and then abandoned the 'scope. The flashing in the celestial globe continued, but the ship no longer danced in its path.

The big twenty-inch Cassegrain showed nothing at all, and Hendall returned to the bridge scratching his head. Nothing on the spotting 'scope and nothing on the big instrument.

That intermittent spot was large enough to mean a huge meteor. But wait. At their speed, it should have retrogressed in the celestial globe unless it was so huge and so far away—but Sol didn't appear on the globe and it was big and far away, bigger by far. Nothing short of a planet at less-than-planetary distances would do this.

Not even a visible change in the position of the spot.

"Therefore," thought Hendall, "this is no astral body that makes this spot!"

Hendall went to a cabinet and withdrew a cable with a plug on either end. He plugged one end into the test plug on the meteor spotter and the opposite end into a speaker. A low humming emanated from the speaker in synchronism with the flashing of the celestial globe.

It hit a responsive chord.

Hendall went to the main communication microphone and spoke. His voice went all over the *Empress of Kolain* from pilot room and cargo spaces to swimming pool and infirmary.

"Attention!" he said in a formal tone. "Attention to official orders!"

Dancers stopped in midstep. Swimmers paused and then made their way to the edges of the pool and sat with their feet dangling in the warm water. Diners sat with their forks poised foolishly.

"Official orders!" That meant an emergency.

Hendall continued: "I believe that something never before tried is being attempted. I am forced against my better knowledge to believe that some agency is trying to make contact with us; a spaceship in flight! This is unknown in the annals of space flying and is, therefore, indicative of something important. It would not have been tried without preparations unless an emergency exists.

"However, the requirements of an officer of space do not include a knowledge of code because of the lack of communication with the planets while in space. Therefore, I request that any person with a working knowledge of International Morse will please present himself to the nearest officer."

Minutes passed. Minutes during which the flashing lights continued.

Then the door of the bridge opened and Third Officer Jones entered with a thirteen-year-old boy at his heels. The youngster's eyes went wide at the sight of the instruments on the bridge, and he looked around in amazed interest.

"This is Freddy Thomas," said Jones. "He knows code!"

"Go to it, Mr. Thomas," said Hendall.

The boy swelled visibly. You could almost hear him thinking: "He called me 'mister'!"

Then he went to the table by the speaker and reached for pencil and paper. "It's code all right," he said. Then Freddy winked at Jones. "He has a lousy fist!"

Freddy Thomas began to write.

"—course and head for Terra direct" —the beam faded for seconds—"Venusian fever and you will be quarantined.

"Calling CQ, calling CQ, calling CQ. Calling *Empress of Kolain* . . . empowered us to contact you and convey . . . message— You are requested to correct your course and head . . . a plague of Venusian fever and you—Williams of Interplanet has empowered us . . . the following message: 'You are requested to correct your . . . head for Terra direct.' Calling CQ. . . ."

"Does that hash make sense to you?" asked Jones of Hendall.

"Sure," smiled Hendall, "it is fairly plain. It tells us that Williams of Interplanet wants us to head for Terra direct because of a plague of Venusian fever that would cause us to stay in quarantine. That would ruin the Line Moss. Prepare to change course, Mr. Jones!"

"Who could it be?" asked Jones foolishly.

"There is only one outfit in the Solar System that could possibly think of a stunt like this. And that is Channing and Franks of Interplanetary Communications. This signal came from Venus Equilateral."

"Wait a minute," said Freddy Thomas. "Here's some more."

"'As soon as this signal—intelligible—at right angles to your course for ten minutes. That will take—out of—beam and reflected—will indicate to us—left the area and know of our attempt.'"

"They're using a beam of some sort that indicates to them that we are on the other end but we can't answer. Mr. Jones, and Pilot Canton, ninety degrees north for ten minutes! Call the navigation officer to correct our course. I'll make the announcement to the passengers. Mr. Thomas, you are given the freedom of the bridge for the rest of the trip."

Mr. Thomas was overwhelmed. He'd learn plenty—and that would help him when he applied for training as a space officer; unless he decided to take a position with Interplanetary Communications when he grew up.

The signal faded from the little cruiser and silence prevailed. Don spoke into the microphone and said: "Run her up a millisecond," to the beam controller. The beam wiped the space above the previous course for several minutes and Franks was sending furiously:

"You have answered our message. We'll be seeing you."

Channing told the man in the cruiser to return. He kicked the main switch and the generators whined down the scale and coasted to a stop. Tube filaments darkened and meters returned to zero.

"O. K., Walton. Let the spinach lay. Get the next crew to clean up the mess and polish the set-up into something presentable. I'll bet a cooky that we'll be chasing spaceships all the way to Pluto after this. We'll work it into a fine thing and perfect our technique. Right now I owe the gang a dinner, right?"

Nothing ever happens at Venus Equilateral. The weather is always right. It never rains or storms. There is no icy street nor heat-waved plain. There is no mud. There is no summer, no winter, no spring, no fall. People ice skate and swim in adjacent rooms. There is no moon to enchant for the moon is millions of miles away. There is no night or day and the stars blaze out in the same sky with the sun; and it has been said that on Venus Equilateral you have been in the only place where the Clouds of Magellan and Polaris can be seen at the same time from your living-room window.

Venus Equilateral is devoted to the business of supplying communication between the three inner planets. As such, it is more than worth it. And though electromagnetic waves travel with the speed of light in vacuo, Channing and his crew were fast asleep by the time that Williams, of Interplanet, read the following message:

EMPRESS OF KOLAIN CONTACTED AND MESSAGE CONVEYED. SHIP WILL PUT IN AT TERRA AS PER YOUR REQUEST. YOURS FOR BETTER COMMUNICATIONS.

DON CHANNING.

THE END.

Sanctuary

by H. H. Holmes

The Commandoman was afflicted by one severe problem: he was in the wrong place—German-occupied territory—at the wrong time—after the Nazis had discovered his presence. He could think of only one answer; the professor had a better answer!

Illustrated by Williams

So there I was at dinner with a Gestapo chief.

It wouldn't be wise nor politic, not right now, to say where this took place. It wouldn't be wise nor possible, as you'll see later, to say when it took place. Temporally speaking, the events rambled. As to place, it should be enough to say that it was near the coast of quote unoccupied quote France, and I won't even say which coast. There's no point in tipping them off on where the new secret weapon is operating.

I'm afraid the names aren't true either, but that won't matter to you. One Gestapo chief is much the same as another to you, and you wouldn't know my Colonel von Schwarzenau from the Major Helm that they got in Zagreb the other day or the Erich Guttart who met up with his near Lublin. And you probably wouldn't have heard of Dr. Norton Palgrave under his real name either. Your grandchildren will, though, whether they're majoring in science or history.

I'm giving my name straight, out of egotism, I suppose. You may have heard it—Jonathan Holding. No? Well, most of my stuff was privately printed in Paris. One volume in this country with new directions, "Apollo Mammosus." I was one of that crowd in Paris. The æsthetic Expatriate, that was me. I visited with Gertrude and Alice; I talked bullfighting with Ernest; I got drunk with Elliot; I sneered at everything American except the checks—you get the picture?

I wasn't in any hurry to get out of Paris even after the war started and the embassy began making noises about neutrals clearing out to where they belonged. What the hell, we had the Maginot Line between them and us, didn't we? And Paris could never be captured. Even in 1870 she held out, and from all I'd read of that siege it sounded like interesting raw material. She'd stick it out, and I'd stick it out with her.

And then came May, 1940, and I found out.

A lot of people found out a hell of a lot in the month or two following that May. I'll lay you whatever odds you want that there hasn't been such a period for taking stock of truth since the start of Western civilization. I found out things about the world and the people in it, and I found out things about myself.

It wasn't the same Jonathan Holding that wound up on this coast, which shall still be nameless but which was for me, in a very true sense, the seacoast of Bohemia. (I've still got my habit of allusive quotations, I see.) How I got there, why my left hand is a finger the poorer and my brain a great many thoughts the richer, how I saved Jeannot from the Little Massacre at Eaux-des-Anges and how I failed to save old Patelin, how I accidentally made contact with the Free French—or Fighting French, as they are now by name and have always been by spirit—by asking at a bakery for my own particular hard-to-get kind of croissant, all that's a long story and a different one. Just the end of it has to be mentioned here to explain why I wound up at the dinner table with Colonel von Schwarzenau and why Dr. Palgrave baffled the Gestapo by laying—and creating—a black-faced ghost.

"We can get you on a ship," De Champsfleuris told me. When I had last seen him he was some sort of an undersecretary in the foreign department. Now he looked as much at home in his crude fisher's garments and his stocking cap as ever he had in a white tie at a reception. "It is simple, that. Within eight days a fishing boat leaves which will not arrest itself until it is arrived at —" No, I'll x out that word; it would indicate the coast. Say England, Portugal, Africa, whatever strikes your fancy. "But you must live somewhere until then. The inn is not safe. An American—but, yes, you still retain the slightest of accents, my friend—living here to no purpose— We do not have tourists now. And still less safe to establish you with one of my friends, for I would imperil not only you but him." He mused, and then his eyes glinted as I had once seen them glint when he remembered that a Rurittanian Plyszt took diplomatic precedence over a Graustarkian Glagolnik. "Dr. Palgrave," he said softly.

"Who's he?" I asked.

"You do not know of Dr. Palgrave, you an American? But then I ask myself how many Americans know of your fine surrealist work. Each man to his field, and the greatest in his field may be unknown save to himself. This Dr. Palgrave, he has a villa here, where his laboratory also finds itself."

"Research? What sort?"

De Champsfleuris' eyes twinkled. "Ah! That you will learn, my friend, do not fear. He is a strange one, that. I do not know myself, me, Henri-Marie de Champsfleuris, who can tell at a glance if a diplomat is authorized to make twice the concessions which he offers, I do not know if that one is one of the greatest men in the world or only one of the greatest fools. You are an artist; perhaps you will tell me."

"And he is—" I felt a little awkward as to how to put it. "He is one of us?"

"No— Alas, no. He has not awakened himself. He is as you were, my friend, a few short months ago. If he knew why you were here and what it is that you think to do when you leave here, I should not speak for his reception. But say only that you are an American from his old university. Say that you interest yourself— Are you acquainted with time theory?"

I nodded. "It's one of the few aspects of modern thought that we surrealists found material in."

"Good. Then talk to him of that. He will invite you to stay at the villa. Stay there, and do nothing until I send word to you through the postman Soisson."

It seemed a curious station on the underground railway, to spend a week in a luxurious villa taking time theory. But I had no suspicion then of how curious. I certainly never expected to meet, at my first dinner there, the head of the local Gestapo. Which brings us back now to when you came in.

Herr Oberst Heinz von Schwarzenau would be a fine name for one of the lean and leering Gestapo villains beloved of melodrama; but this jolly little man with the round, beaming face and the pudgy white hands hardly seemed at first glance to live up to his label. Dr. Palgrave wasn't too well cast as the Mad Scientist, either. His hair was neatly combed and his eyes were mildly blinking. His dinner jacket hung on his thin stooped shoulders about as gracefully as it might have decorated a scarecrow. There was nothing colorful or eccentric about him but his conversation. That was enough.

"You may define a dimension as you will, my dear colonel," he observed over the fish. "You may quite correctly term it the degree of manifoldness of a magnitude or any other proper terminological gibberish your methodical mind chooses to employ. But a dimension is basically a measure of extent; and if extent is measurable, then extension is possible."

The colonel beamed. "I am not sure if you are playing with ideas, or simply with words. What is your opinion, Mr. Holding?"

I had to fight to keep from jumping each time he addressed me. I had to remind myself that my exploits in the Little Massacre had been strictly anonymous and that the Gestapo, so far as I knew, had no more information on me than that I was a practitioner of degenerate art but otherwise harmless. I was, I kept saying to myself, far safer here, as a sort of purloined letter in person, than anywhere else. But I have since wondered how the purloined letter itself felt about the Minister D—'s brilliant ruse. "What are ideas themselves but playing with words?" I said casually. "Can a wordless idea exist?"

Colonel von Schwarzenau frowned. "That - is loose thinking," he said severely, in that overperfect English of his. "Ideas can exist for instance as mathematical formulas, or even as an unformulated series of sensory images. Please, Mr. Holding, more discipline in your thought." Having put me in my decadent place, he turned back to his host as Antoine brought on the braised meat. "But granting, sir, your possibility of extension in the time dimension, to what practical purpose do you propose to apply this theory?"

I had my marked suspicion that the meat was horseflesh, but Antoine had accomplished such wonders with a sauce bordelaise that I didn't give a damn. That sauce would have been enough to distract my attention from most conversations, but Dr. Palgrave's next remark jerked me back.

"Propose to? But, my dear colonel, I have applied it. My time machine is already in operation."

All of the colonel's plump body shook with delight. "Ah, so? And what treasures do you bring us from the future, dear doctor? Ray guns perhaps, to aid us in perpetuating the New Order?"

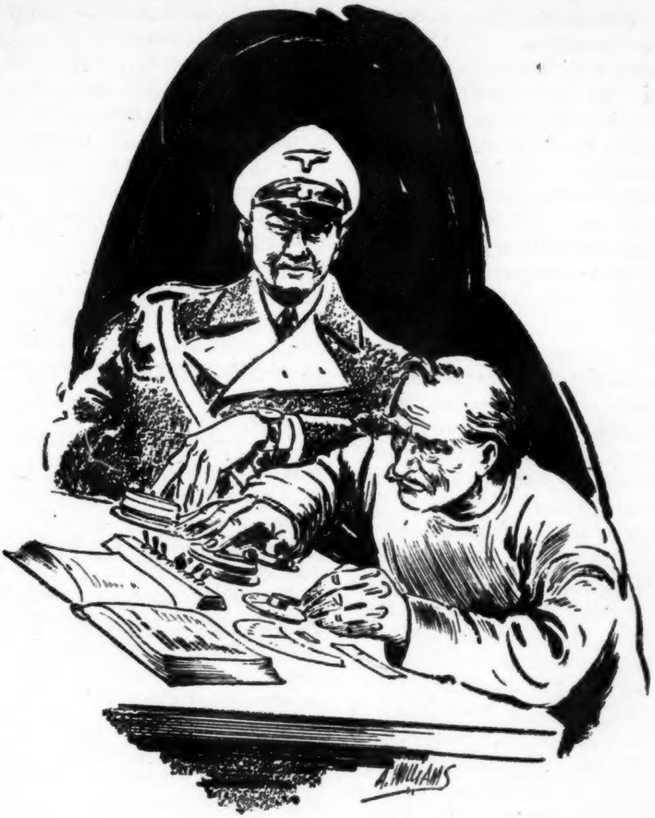
"I must confess that I have so far succeeded only with the past, but—"

"The past? But there are treasures there, too. Perhaps you could fetch back and restore the honor and glory of France?" He chuckled long at this one.

"I . . . I have not as yet ventured into the machine myself. But I consider my efforts with the transportation of inanimate objects and of small animals to have proved my case completely. Iron sent into the past, left there for a year, and brought back has returned covered with rust, while it remained in the machine for only a minute of our time here. My first guinea pig died of old age through a mistake in my calculations. He was not yet adult when I put him in the machine; when I took him out thirty seconds later, he was dead of senile decay."

Colonel von Schwarzenau's chuckle became almost a giggle. "You are so symbolic, my dear doctor. It is you and not our friend here who should be the poet. Iron that rusts and guinea pigs that die of senile decay, always while seeking the past and ignoring the future. What better picture could you paint of the Third Republic?"

I held my temper. "And you offer—"



"Steel that never rusts and men who never age while their eyes remain fixed on the future, on the glory of the New Order. Steel and the bodies of men and always the future, the German future that must be the future of the world." For a moment he was in deadly earnest, but then the pudgy chuckle crept back into his voice. "Ah, it is good to be among representatives of your great democracy who still understand us. And such representatives. A scientist and a poet. A scientist who plays with time machines and a poet who plays with surrealism. There is your science and your art in a democracy. And yet you understand us, do you not, my friends? You are the admiring crowd who look up at the spiked wheels of the Juggernaut and cry, 'How beautiful is the goddess Kali today!' And because you see her beauty, she will spare you. Yes, you will be spared, and long may you be happy here in your haunted villa. Pursue your time machines and your surreal reality. *And do not interfere.*" There was a fleeting expression of grimness, then a broad beam.

Dinner went like that. We were treated like two not-too-bright but understanding Quislings who were fortunate to be in the good graces of the potent representative of the New Order. I boiled inside. I seethed so that I forgot the excellences of Antoine's miraculous makeshift cooking, even forgot the astonishing significance of Dr. Palgrave's claims. I wanted nothing but to kick out the Herr Oberst's shining white teeth, build them into a marimba, and play "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" on them.

But I had to be sensible. There was work for me to do. I had to put up with this until the fishing boat left. But Palgrave? He was staying here, living in the midst of this, putting up with it, liking it—

I couldn't help myself. I boiled over when Colonel von Schwarzenau made a regretful early departure for an evening tour of inspection. "How can you tolerate that man as a guest?" I burst out, pouring myself an outsize dose of my host's notable brandy. "You, a free American, how can you listen to—"

Dr. Palgrave smiled calmly. "Why should it bother me? Much of what he says may be true. I don't know. Politics are no concern of mine. But if I listen to him politely, he lets me work in peace. What more should I ask?"

I took a deep breath. "Politics," I said slowly, "are no concern of yours. I never thought to hear those words again. I thought they were as dead as the grandfather of all dodos. Man, have you any notion of what your friend the colonel stands for?"

"Young man," Palgrave said, with a certain quiet dignity, "I am a scientist. The petty squabbles of men hold no meaning for me. I have my laboratory here. It is a valuable possession, expensive and difficult to reconstruct. I shall certainly not risk it by bothering my head about matters that do not concern me. Shall we have Antoine bring us some more—well, let us continue to call it coffee, in the living room?"

I changed the subject when the coffee came. I couldn't risk insulting my host. And a curious phrase of the colonel's had recurred to my mind. "Your friend wished us happiness in this 'haunted villa.' What did he mean by that? Surely this is too modern a place to have its ancestral specters?"

Outside the large windows of the living room we should have seen the terrace and the sea, but the blackout curtains shut us into our narrow personal cell. From outside a steady drumming noise beat into this cell, the percussive rhythm of machinery from the nearby Barras plant, origin of France's cheapest pleasure car in peace times and now given over to even De Champsfleuris knew not what. Dr. Palgrave hesitated before replying, and the steady thumps of manufactured death were loud in the room.

"Yes," he said at last. "This place is, by reliable reports, haunted. Or once was. One sole manifestation, which is, I gather from physical students, most unusual."

"Give," I said. "Or does your scientific mind reject it?"

"So many scientific minds have rejected what I have accomplished that I keep my own mind open, or try to. But this is a curious incident. It was before my tenancy, when the villa belonged to its original owner, the British novelist Uptonleigh. One day in 1937, I believe, in the midst of a house party, there suddenly appeared a ghost. A black-faced ghost, like a relic from one of the minstrel shows of my boyhood, clad in dirty dungarees and tattered tennis shoes. He spoke with an American accent and announced that he had just been treacherously murdered and had never expected heaven to be like this. The guests were sufficiently merry when he arrived, as was usually the case with Uptonleigh's guests, to enter into the spirit with the spirit, so to speak; if it chose to believe that heaven was one long party, they would give it one long party. The party lasted, I believe, for six weeks, almost equaling the record set by the wake which Uptonleigh held when his best novel was filmed. In that time the ghost assumed civilized attire, washed its face and grew a beard. The party might have gone on to a new record if the ghost had not vanished as abruptly as it appeared. It has never been seen since."

Dr. Palgrave related this preposterous narrative as calmly as he had told of his time machine, as calmly as he had accepted Colonel von Schwarzenau's manifestos of the New Order. I smiled politely. "Some drunken American who decided to crash a good party," I suggested.

Dr. Palgrave shook his head. "You do not understand. The ghost appeared suddenly from nowhere in the midst of them. One moment there was empty space, the next this black-face intruder. All accounts allow of no rational explanation."

The Barras works thumped. I stared at the thin-bearded scientist. Did nothing interest him, nothing perturb him but his ventures into the past with senile guinea pigs and rusting iron? "It would be fun," I said, "to see your ghost meet your colonel."

Dr. Palgrave half smiled. "But we talk of these trivial matters when I have so much to show you, Holding. I want so very much to interest you in my experiments. I even dare hope that if I can convince you—"

There was an honest-to-God gleam in his eye. "Hold on," I said hurriedly. "You aren't aiming to graduate from guinea pigs to me, are you?"

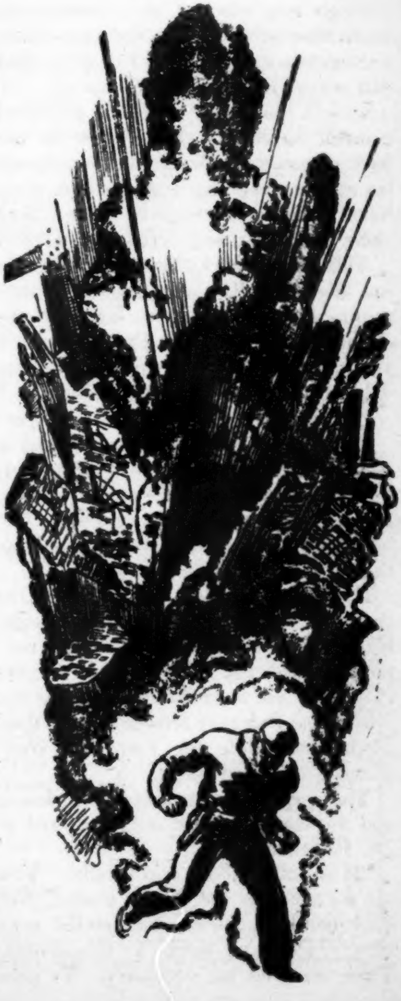
"I should not have put it quite that way, but my thought was something of that nature."

"I'm afraid," I said politely, "I haven't any scientific aptitude. I'd never learn to handle the controls on a time machine. I can't even drive a car."

"Oh, that would be nothing. I have a remote-control panel so that I can operate the machine from such a distance that its field does not affect me. Contact with the field, you see, sets up a certain sympathetic parallel in the electronic vibrations of the blood stream; it is that that enables me to recall a living object from the past even if it has left the physical bounds of the machine."

"Then you have brought them back alive?"

"Guinea pigs, yes. But I have not had the opportunity to experiment with higher forms of life. How the field would affect the nervous system, whether there might be certain synaptic short circuits— Antoine refuses to make the attempt. And moreover he is so valuable a cook— But if I could interest you in the tremendous possibilities—"



I cursed Henri-Marie de Champsfleuris thoroughly up one side and down the other. It wasn't enough that he should play purloined letter with me under the nose of a Gestapo colonel. No; he has to expose me as guinea pig to a time-machine crackpot. I began to think it would have been a simpler and safer life to hide in hedges, sleep in haymows, and live off ditch water till that fishing boat sailed. I couldn't antagonize my host; but I was damned if I was going to have curious currents shot through me, whether they transported me in time or not. I was trying to frame a courteous excuse when I heard a thud that wasn't from the Barras works.

It was the steady rhythmic clump of trained marchers. They went to the back of the house first, and I heard sullen curses and a sharp scream that must have come from Antoine. Then they came back, thudding across the terrace.

The Barras works thumped out death for all men. The feet on the terrace thumped an unknown but far more immediate peril. And Dr. Palgrave talked about the effect of a temporomagnetic field on the ganglia of guinea pigs.

The French windows opened and a squad of four men came in, in gray uniforms with swastika brassards. A corporal saluted us and said nothing. His hand was an inch from his automatic as the men searched the room.

Dr. Palgrave paid no attention to them. I started to speak, but I thought better of it when I caught the corporal's hard eye and saw his fingers twitch. I sat there listening to the details of the Palgrave remote-control time mechanism while the four men completed their wordless search.

The corporal saluted again in silence, and the searchers filed out. I stared at Dr. Palgrave.

"It is nothing," he said calmly. "You see we are near the Barras works. Not infrequently saboteurs are spotted near here. Perhaps even a Commando. These searches are necessary. To protest would imperil my position. Antoine sometimes objects to the treatment he receives, but I give him a bonus."

I was speechless. But no speech from me was necessary. Dr. Palgrave's remark was answered in a new voice, a fresh crude voice with a vivid Americanism I hadn't heard in years of self-exile.

"Shut up, you guys," it said, "and stay shut. *Fermy le butch or cuppy le gorge,* get me?"

I turned to gape at the ghost of the villa—dirty dungarees, tattered tennis shoes, blackened face and all.

"Why, you're the ghost," Dr. Palgrave observed, as one who notes an interesting but insignificant fact.

"Brother, it's you that's slated to be the ghost if there's any trouble." There was the sheen of steel in the figure's hand—an efficient-looking blade about six inches long that seemed to be all cutting edge.

I got it. "You're a Commando," I said.

He snorted. "You civilians don't know from nothing. I'm a Commandoman." I was put in my place again. "But look, boys. You talk English. You talk it kind of funny—classylike—but tell me: Are you Americans?"

I nodded.

"Is that a relief! I didn't do so good in French class; I was better at rough-and-tumble. And I guess I don't need this either, brothers." He sheathed the glinting six inches. "But get this: You've got to hide me."

"Why?" Dr. Palgrave asked imperturbably.

Blackened eyebrows lifted on the blackened face. The Commandoman jerked a thumb at Palgrave. " 'Why?' he says. Is he nuts?"

"He runs the joint," I said. "I'm just here pretty much the way you are."

"Look, brother," he addressed Dr. Palgrave. "I got cut off from the Commando. That patrol missed me by a flea's eyelash and I ducked in here after they'd gone. But they'll be back. They always search twice; it's a rule. And you've got to hide me."

"Why?" Dr. Palgrave repeated.

"Why? You're an American. Or are you?"

"I am, sir, a citizen of the world of science."

The distant thud of returning footfalls was barely audible over the Barras thumpings.

"Look." The Commandoman's hand rested on his sheath. "You listen to sense or you listen to Betsy. It don't make no matter if I get killed. What the hell, every time you black your face you say to yourself, 'Make-up for the last act.' But I'm the dope they made memorize the plans for sabotage at the works here. I've got to get through to a certain Frenchman with that message. And if they get me there's always the chance I'll crack under the games they play. So you've got to stall them and hide me some way."

The thudding steps were on the terrace now. I knew nothing of the house. I was helpless, but I spoke pleadingly to my host. "Dr. Palgrave, these men, these friends of yours, have declared war against the citizens of your world of science as bitterly as against Poles or Czechs. This Commandoman is fighting your own scientific battle. You must—"

Dr. Palgrave indicated a small door across the room. "In there," he said tersely.

Herr Oberst Heinz von Schwarzenau was with the squad this time. He plumped his pudgy body into the most comfortable chair and came straight to the point. "My dear Dr. Palgrave, I assure you that I regret inconveniencing you. But I fear that this charming, if haunted, villa of yours is harboring a democratic dog of a Commandoman."

Dr. Palgrave said nothing. He sat at his desk and fiddled nervously with some gadgets in front of him. I spoke up.

17

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"Your men searched here once, Herr Oberst."

He glared at the men, and there was terror beneath their impassivity. "They did so. They searched badly. A loyal peasant has informed us, after only the slightest persuasion, that he saw the pig-dog enter this house."

I shrugged. "Dr. Palgrave and I have been sitting here, drinking our . . . coffee, and talking about the ghost. The only interruption was your searching squad." Dr. Palgrave still said nothing.

"So? I begin to understand now the purpose of that ghost legend. How was the ghost described? Black-faced and clad in dirty dungarees and tattered tennis shoes? So that if a servant should see one of these Commando devils here, he might think only, 'Aha! The ghost.' Most ingenious. Most ingenious. We have caught a glimpse of this man, and how well he would serve as your ghost—And you, Dr. Palgrave. I had thought you so faithful an adherent of the New Order."

Dr. Palgrave's fingers twitched at gadgets. "You know me, colonel," he said, almost pitifully. "Can you imagine me a participant in a plot to give sanctuary to Commandos?"

"Frankly, no." The colonel smiled. "But once before in my life I misjudged a man. It can happen; I admit it. That one died slowly, and when he died he was no longer a man—" He chuckled. "But I could think of a more appropriate emasculation for you, dear doctor. If you do not reveal to us the hiding place of this Commando dog—I no longer trust the searching abilities of these dolts—I shall take great personal pleasure in slowly and thoroughly smashing every piece of scientific apparatus in this villa."

Dr. Palgrave started to his feet with a little choking gurgle of "No—"

"But, yes, I assure you. I shall give you fifteen seconds, dear doctor, to make up your mind. Then I shall proceed happily to the task of demolition. I tolerated your eccentric researches while they amused me and you were faithful. Now the devil take them."

"Fifteen seconds—"

Colonel von Schwarzenau glanced up from his wrist watch. "Five are gone."

The Barras thumping rose crescendo in the silence. If our Commandoman escaped, that lethal thumping might stop forever. If he were taken—

"Ten are gone," the colonel announced.

Dr. Palgrave rapped nervously on his desk. He toyed with dials and verniers. He plucked at his lower lip.

"Fiftee—"

Silently, Dr. Palgrave rose and pointed at the small door. I started from my chair, then sank back as the armed squad passed me. I could do nothing. There was ashen dread on Dr. Palgrave's face, and a grin of ugly self-satisfaction on that of the colonel. The corporal jerked open the door.

A stranger stepped out. He was a good-looking young man with a curly red beard, faultlessly dressed in Saville Row white flannels, a subtly figured white shirt, and a professionally arranged ascot. His skin glowed with clean health.

Colonel Heinz von Schwarzenau stared speechlessly. The corporal peered into the room and made a flabbergasted announcement in German to the effect that there were no facilities there for washing or changing clothes, nor any sign of the Commando. One little glimmer of hope shone in von Schwarzenau's eyes. He stepped forward and tugged at the beard.

The stranger said, "Ouch!"

Dr. Palgrave smiled. "I could not resist the joke, my dear colonel. I happened to have another American guest whom you had not yet met. The temptation to build a dramatic introduction was too much for me. But now if you wish to search the house personally for your mythical Commandoman, I shall be glad to be of any assistance that I can. You know my loyalty to you and your friends."

The stranger and I sat silent under the watchful eyes of the corporal while von Schwarzenau searched the house. He returned glowering. "Pigs!" he snorted. "Weakling offspring of impure dogs! You bring me information and what is the result! You allow that one makes a fool of me!"

Not until the footsteps were dead in the distance did anyone speak. Then the stranger burst out, "What goes here, brothers? Where have I been and how did I get back here and— I thought I was dead and was that a heaven for you!"

I began to understand. "Then you—"

"Yes, Holding," Dr. Palgrave explained. "Our friend here is indeed the ghost. I realized that the exact description could not be coincidental. And if he was the ghost, then my time machine must be successful with a human traveler. It must be I who sent him back to Uptonleigh's classic party. And the ghost changed in those six weeks, you will recall, cleaned up and grew a beard. If I could bring him back, he would be completely unrecognizable to von Schwarzenau. So I sent him into my traveling cabinet."

"But how— You didn't go near it."

"I explained to you that it operated by remote control. I sent him on his journey and fetched him back under von Schwarzenau's very eyes, while he thought I was indulging in mere nervous twiddling."

"Brother," the Commandoman said, "I had you tagged all wrong. You're a right guy, after all, and I'm sorry I waved Betsy at you. You've done a good deed today for the United Nations."

"The United Nations?" Dr. Palgrave blinked. "Oh, yes. Yes— But what is important is that I have proved that my time machine is a practical device capable of carrying human life."

The Commandoman gulped. "You

mean I was a guinea pig?" His hand sneaked toward Betsy, but he dropped it again. "Who cares? You saved me, that's the main thing."

"That colonel," Dr. Palgrave spoke reflectively, "he meant what he said—"

"They mostly do, them boys."

"He really meant that he would wantonly destroy all my invaluable apparatus merely to— And I thought that he had a respect for science, an understanding of my—"

It was my chance to strike. "You get it now, Dr. Palgrave? You've been his dupe, his court jester. And when amusement palled, neither you nor your work meant a thing to him. All your research would have been wiped out without a moment's compunction."

"The . . . the devil—" Dr. Palgrave gasped.

I tried not to smile. "You've learned it now, sir. You've learned that your holy world of science isn't sacred to them, doesn't stand apart from the rest of the world. There are no islands any more. There never have been. No man is an island, entire of himself. And every man who is not a part of their black force is going to find himself and all that he holds holiest destroyed when it suits their convenience. One by one, we learn our lesson. Some of us had sense and soul enough to learn it as part of mankind from seeing the sufferings of others; some, like you and me, had to be pushed around personally to learn it. But every lesson learned, from whatever motive, is one more blow aimed at their heart."

"That's telling him, brother," said the Commandoman.

Dr. Palgrave stood erect, and his eyes did not blink. "Your next step, sir, I believe, will be to resume your former condition of grime. I shall aid you in any way possible. Consider this house your sanctuary, and inform those who follow after you, if you are fortunate enough to return, that this villa is theirs."

"Thanks, brother. I'll do that little thing."

"And tell your commander of this experience. He will doubtless not believe you, but insist that he communicate with the general staff. Take these formulas, and see that they reach the finest physicists in England. They will at least understand the possibility of what I am doing. Then we can arrange some communication and figure out a method for practical applications. I can already foresee, for instance, how futile would be advance secret-service notice of a Commando raid if the Commando moved back to do its damage the day *before* it landed here."

The Commandoman swung to his feet. "Me," he said, "I don't understand a word of this. I know something screwy has happened and I got away from the Gestapo, and was I ever on a sweet party! But I'll do what you say, brother." He raised two spread fingers.

My own part in the experiments for the next week and the details of my escape in the fishing boat are not essential to this narrative. I can best conclude it by a newspaper dispatch which I read when last in London, and the comment thereon by one of my friends in higher military circles.

> VICHY, June 23.—The Vichy government announces the execution of twelve hostages for the recent sabotage at the Barras plant near *** and the murder of Colonel Heinz von Schwarzenau on June 12th. "The Jews and Communists involved in the treachery," the announcement reads, "have not yet been apprehended. It is believed that they were aided and reinforced by a party of Commando troops. Twelve more hostages will be shot daily until they are under arrest.

"But you know, old boy," young Wrothbottam insisted, "that's devilish peculiar. There was no Commando raid at *** on the twelfth. And what's odder yet, there was one on the thirteenth. Reported operations successful, but there hasn't been a word about it in the Vichy dispatches."

THE END.

Sea Of Mystery

by Willy Ley

The Sargasso Sea is simply a mass of seaweed floating in the ocean. But it has been floating in that same spot, though completely unattached to anything solid, for so many millenniums that whole chains of evolution have worked themselves out in that loose mass of weeds!

Illustrated by Olga Ley

The story of the Sea of Mystery began aboard an old sailing vessel, a Spanish caravel which crossed the thirty-third degree of Western longitude. It was a Sunday, warm and with fair weather. The date was September 16, 1492. And the name of the caravel was *Santa Maria.*

For many days previous to that Sunday the crew of the ship and "the admiral," Cristobal Colon or Christopher Columbus, had seen nothing but waves and an occasional fish, the sky and occasional clouds and the stars at night. But on that Sunday there appeared on the surface of the ocean "many bunches of very green weed, which had for a short time, as it seemed, been torn from land; whereby all judged that they were near some island." The notion that it might be the mainland of Asia itself was discouraged by the admiral who declared that it must be "further on," he himself was not sure when he could expect to reach it.

The following Monday the men fished some of the weed from the sea and found in it a tiny crab, well camouflaged and so small in size that nobody even inquired whether it might be edible. Up to that day and during Tuesday and Wednesday the presence of the green seaweed was encouraging, it seemed to indicate that land was near, even if only islands. But during the following days, September 21st and 22nd, the men of the crew of the caravel became alarmed, the whole sea seemed to be covered with green and yellow weeds. They were afraid that it might become so dense that it would hinder the progress of the vessel and they actually wasted some time looking for open channels, as one looks for open channels in the ice in Northern latitudes. They failed to find such open channels, but the weed also failed to hinder their progress. So they accepted its presence and all it caused was an almost daily entry in the journal. *Vieron muchas yerbas*—"saw plenty weed," it read.

This was the discovery of the Sargasso Sea, still the champion as far as mysteriousness goes, of all places on

Earth. It is interesting to note that the mysteriousness of a place increases somewhat with the square of the distance from the onlooker. The question "what is, in your opinion, the most mysterious place on Earth," will be answered according to the habitat and/or nationality of the person questioned. To a European, Death Valley is a most mysterious region, much more so than to an American, although the actual knowledge about Death Valley of both might be equal, even if that means zero. Tibet is more mysterious to an American as well as to a European than it is to an Asiatic. All of them, however, will be willing to agree on the Sargasso Sea as the most mysterious place on Earth. Being situated in the open ocean where nobody lives permanently, the difference of environment is added to the "square of the distance appeal."

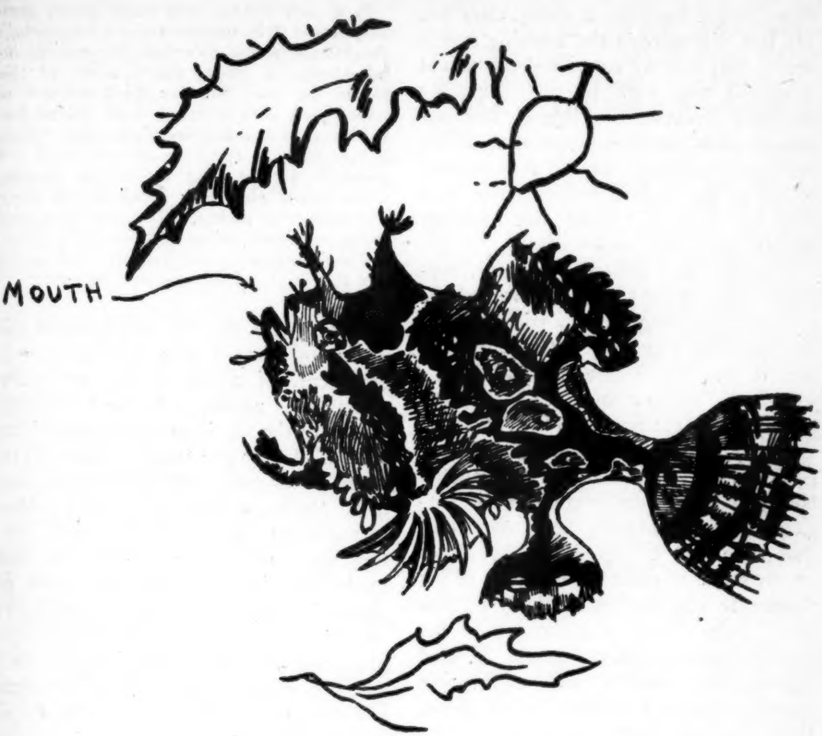
But before we go on with the story of the Sargasso Sea it might be well to devote a paragraph or two to the question whether Columbus was actually its first discoverer. For some time geographers—among them such important representatives of that science as Carl Ritter, Peschel and Ruge—were of the opinion, or at least harbored the suspicion, that the Sargasso Sea was known to the ancients. The Greeks, it was said, knew about its existence from Phoenician sources. This opinion was founded upon a few rather short *en passant* remarks in classic writings. Skylax of Karyanda, a contemporary of Alexander the Great, spoke about clumps of seaweed in the Western Sea and Theophrastos was quoted as having written: "Outside of the Pillars of Hercules seaweed of astonishing size can be found, it is said, having a greater width than the palm of the hand." But for strange reasons nobody noticed that that quotation was incomplete. The next sentence read: "This seaweed is carried from the outer into the inner sea by currents." The outer sea, of course, the Atlantic Ocean and the inner sea the Mediterranean, weeds from the Sargasso Sea do not occur far enough to the East to be caught by a current which might make them drift into the Mediterranean.

Skylax of Karyanda also did not mention the Sargasso Sea, even if his words might be interpreted that way by a present-day reader; he said that floating seaweed occurs occasionally in quantities along the coasts that are the trade routes of the Phoenicians. And floating seaweed does occur occasionally along the coasts of Morocco and of Portugal.

For all these reasons it is now generally accepted that Columbus discovered the Sargasso Sea, even though he was not the first discoverer of America.

It seems, however, as if the Phoenicians, though they had no knowledge of the existence of the Sargasso Sea, invented something that bears a close resemblance not to the real thing, but to the Sargasso Sea of fable. Outside the Pillars of Hercules, they asserted, there is a stretch of sea which is one large heaving meadow of plants, impossible to penetrate. That section is all the more dangerous since the plants were provided with foot-long hard and sharply pointed thorns.

The Phoenicians were masters in telling stories of this kind. All the horrors existing in ancient mythology were concentrated around and west of the Pillars of Hercules by them. There the entrance to the shadow world to the realm of the dead, could be found. Blood-chilling Medusa dwelt there, too. Even the exit from the Mediterranean was almost impossible to negotiate, it was flanked by Scylla and Charybdis. These two Homeric monsters were later placed in the Strait of Messina. We now know definitely that they were supposed to flank the Strait of Gibraltar. The Messina Strait explanation is a blunder of philologist—on a par with the famous assertion of the blue-blindness of the ancient Greeks—completely unsubstantiated and flatly contradicted by geographical features mentioned in the tale.



But all these geographical features fit the Strait of Gibraltar nicely, Charybdis then turns out to be a whirlpool current on the African side. It still exists and it is actually powerful enough to endanger small vessels like rowboats on occasion. The story of Scylla—on the European side—was based, as I have shown in an article in *Natural History Magazine*—the publication of The American Museum of Natural History—on the occasional occurrence of giant squids in and near the Strait of Gibraltar.

The Phoenicians had a very sound reason for "planting" all these tales. They had grown rich, and stayed rich, by being the only traders linking the Mediterranean with what is now the West Coast of Spain and Portugal and points North. Horror tales of that kind were the cheapest and easiest way to avoid competition in the flourishing trade; it was a then very effective method of maintaining a trade monopoly. Incidentally, many ancient tales of that ilk were originally invented for the same reason; the value of anything brought from afar increased if the buyer could be convinced that the journey necessary to obtain the article was not only long, but also so dangerous that special luck was required to complete it successfully.

The old Phoenician tales about a "weed sea" somehow lingered on, although no definite place was ever assigned to them. In fact Columbus, when contemplating his voyages which was to reach Asia from the east by sailing westward, had been warned that there might be such a thing after all. He had disregarded the warning and it seems that nobody connected the actual Sargasso Sea with the old legend—probably because the legend had assumed such horrible shape that a few bunches of seaweed, even if they seemed to cover the surface solidly when seen from a distance, could not possibly satisfy the horrid expectations.

Caravels and galleons, frigates, corvettes and clippers, they all crossed the region of the Sargasso Sea without finding anything especially noteworthy. In fact it was not before the end of the nineteenth century until the "fabulous" conception of the Sargasso Sea, or, more correctly, the Sargasso Sea of romanticism, was fully evolved. Strangely enough scientific exploration of the Sargasso Sea had already been started at that time. It is significant that Jules Verne failed to place a single one of his numerous sea stories in the Sargasso Sea. Jules Verne did not weave his stories around existing legends, he used reports on scientific and engineering achievements as a nucleus for his yarns. What he saw about the Sargasso Sea were scientific reports which made the whole area appear merely curious, an immense stretch of salt water strewn with sea weeds. But there was nothing dangerous about them, according to these reports, nor was there a special mystery connected with the weeds and their usually small inhabitants, in short the Sargasso Sea did not appeal to Jules Verne as a suitable *locale* for a story.

A description which would have intrigued Jules Verne was not published until 1897, when he was old and of poor health, famous and somewhat tired. That description was printed in a magazine which was then, as it is now, generally regarded as a reliable source of information: *Chambers' Journal.* The article, printed in the May 1897 issue of that journal, presented the romanticistic conception of the Sargasso Sea full grown and with most of the curicules an imaginative author could think up.

> It is only natural that ships should carefully avoid this marine rubbish-heap where the Atlantic shoots its refuse. It seems doubtful whether a sailing vessel would be able to cut her way into the thick network of weeds even with a strong wind behind her. With regard to a steamer, no prudent skipper is ever likely to make the attempt, for it will certainly not be long before the tangling weeds would altogether choke up his screw and render it useless. The most energetic explorer of land or sea will find himself baffled with regard to the Sargasso Sea by the fact that it is neither one nor the other.

The article did not only provide this intriguing picture of a floating almost-continent, of a sea which one might enter but is unable to leave, it also told details of the sea from which there is no return. Inside the tangled mass of sargasso weeds you could find derelict ships of all nations and all ages, held together in the tangle of marine vegetation, rotting away under the tropical sun, but unable to sink, the haunting souls of damned ships. Viking vessels and Spanish caravels, warships of the Spanish Main and once fast clippers with a once valuable cargo, schooners and trawlers and even lifeboats from lost steamships. It was asserted:

> That sea held keels or skeletons of ruined ships, so covered with barnacles, shells and weeds that the original outline is entirely lost to view; and here and there a derelict ship, transformed from a floating terror of the deep into a mystery out of reach of men in a museum of unexplained enigmas.

That description, as has been said, was published in 1897.

In 1898 the first story based on it appeared, written by the American author Thomas Janvier and entitled, plainly and simply, "Sargasso Sea." Janvier's hero is a young man by the name of Roger Stetworth who happened to get onto a slave-runner when taking passage to the Indies in search for a job. Getting into a fight with the skipper of the slave vessel he is beaten up, robbed and finally thrown overboard, but is lucky enough to find a floating mast to which he clings. Then he drifts into the Sargasso Sea, finally to land amidst "a vast ruinous congregation of wrecks, so far extending that it was as though all the wrecked ships in the world were lying together there in a miserable desolate company."

As can be expected he finds skeletons still on the guns on lost warships, slave ships with skeletons still shackled to the hull. There are indications that some survivors of wrecked vessels stayed survivors in an unguessable fashion and finally he even sees two man-ghosts fight with each other to the death. At long last he finds a small steam launch which is easy to repair, but the trip out of the Sargasso Sea is an almost impossible adventure. Standing far over the bow with a long saw he had to work machinelike for days and days, sawing a channel into which the little steam engine could push the boat. Traveling some three miles per day he needed a full month to saw his way out, to reach open water and to encounter a passing vessel.

It was bad luck for Thomas Janvier that the "Cruise of the *Cachalot*" appeared during the same year, a book written by the first mate of an American whaler—his name was Frank T. Bullen—which actually stayed for days in the Sargasso Sea without being able to move, but not because of the weeds, but because the whaler was caught in a dead calm which happens frequently in that region. And Bullen could not find enough praise for the beauties of the Sargasso Sea and for the strange animal life that the crew found in the weeds.

At least half a dozen similar accounts praising the beauties of the Sargasso Sea appeared during the next decade, but in 1911 the old horror conception was revived by Justus Miles Forman in a story for *Colliers*. And ten years later the readers of a daily Berlin newspaper of very large circulation was thrilled every morning at breakfast by the serial instalments of a novel entitled "The Land of Lost Vessels," taking place in the middle of the Sargasso Sea, where a bully is ruling a hundred odd survivors of all ages and nationalities—including some children born there—until the hero repairs a wireless set in a wrecked steamer and calls seaplanes for help.

The impressiveness of the Sargasso Sea is not based on such a floating island of lost vessels—but that does not mean that this phenomenon is not impressive. It does not even mean that it lacks other than purely intellectual appeal.

The Sargasso Sea is actually unique.

Situated roughly between the thirtieth and fortieth parallel of north latitude and between the thirtieth and seventy-fifth meridian West of Greenwich the area is about two and a half million square miles, roughly the same as the area of the continental United States. The Sargasso Sea lacks a definite outline, but it has a more or less definite shape, an oval area bound by currents of the Atlantic Ocean. Because of these currents the whole of the Sargasso Sea rotates slowly, floating things actually drift toward the center. But the rotation is so slow that it is imperceptible, to the eye the Sargasso Sea presents an immense stretch of very calm, very clear and incredibly blue salt water.

The sargassum, the weed from which this area derived its name, is not always distributed evenly, in one year a certain sector might be so sparsely "weeded" that there are hardly five bunches of it between the observer and the horizon. Next year that same sector may be covered with floating weed so that it, some little distance from the ship, looks solid enough to walk on.

But it never is, not even when especially dense. One oceanographer—Parr—has invented a special gadget for sampling sargasso weed and from very many such samples taken almost everywhere in the Sargasso Sea Parr arrived at the conclusion that there are about ten million tons of seaweed afloat. Ten million tons sounds like an awful lot, but the Sargasso Sea is big, if those ten million tons were even more evenly distributed than they normally are only twenty-four ounces of weed could be fished from each acre of the Sargasso Sea. Even so the Sargasso Sea holds a record of some kind: there is no other area on Earth which produces such a quantity of a single species of plants.

The scientific name of the sargasso weed is *Sargassum bacciferum,* but there is no scientific name for the method of reproduction of that representative of the so-called brown algae. In view of the facts even the word "reproduction" sounds exaggerated. At first it had been believed that the Gulf Weed, as sargassum is often called, grew on submarine banks and floated to the surface after having been torn off. The floating pieces, it was said, stayed alive for only a few days and then decayed. All this sounded perfectly reasonable, all the more so as seaweeds that wore torn loose somewhere and drifted decaying into the Sargasso Sea have been found often enough. The original homes of these weeds were known, it remained to find the home ground of the sargassum and since a search along the American coast and the coasts of the West Indies islands proved unsuccessful it was thought that the home ground of sargassum was on the bottom of the sea, more or less directly underneath the place where they were found afloat.

When the famous *Challenger* expedition of 1873 entered the region of the Sargasso Sea, the search for these submarine banks where the sargassum really grew, began. To the great surprise of everybody concerned the *Challenger* men failed to find them. Possibly they were a long distance away, possibly there were undersea currents which carried the weed along until it floated up to the surface. But such undersea currents could not be detected either, maybe sargassum was actually pelagic, floating and reproducing where it was found by passing ships. But the samples of sargassum that were taken never showed the slightest indication of reproductive organs. The little clusters of "berries" which were taken for such by the early sailors were quickly recognized as little air bladders which keep the plants afloat.

A Danish scientist by the name of Winge, a member of the Danish Oceanographic Expedition of 1908-9 finally proved conclusively that gulfweed does not grow anywhere else and that it is not torn loose by storm and waves. It is decidedly a pelagic perennial and as for reproduction, well, it has none. At least not in the accepted sense of the word. It does not form seeds, it does not produce spores. Tubers, buds and runners are meaningless terms as far as gulfweed is concerned. It simply grows all the time at one end and decays at the other.

The whole organization of sargassum shows, however, that it must have been a species of "rooted" brown algae in the past and must once have been torn off. But nobody can say when and where, the only thing that can be stated is that it must have happened long ago, because sargassum now dies when it is forced to live under the same conditions as those algae that are torn off and drift into the Sargasso Sea, to die there where the other kind flourishes.

While the sargassum weed is too small and, in spite of its ten-million-ton total, not numerous enough to provide a jungle for ships and men it does form a magnificent jungle for small sea creatures. The Sargasso Sea is full of more or less weird things, weird mainly because they all try to imitate the shape of seaweed for better camouflage. The small crab seen by Columbus and his men in the bundle of weed they fished up is about as large as a dime and hardly visible against its natural background. It is now catalogued as *Planes minutus,* "little wanderer," if you insist on a translation. Another crab of the Sargasso Sea just as numerous and hardly larger than *Planes minutus* is the "drifting crab of the sea god"—*Neptunus pelagicus*—it is easily possible that it was this kind that was caught by Columbus, people were not in the habit of writing clear zoological descriptions in those days.

About as numerous as these crabs is *Scyllaea pelagica,* the name of which reminds you of the Homeric horrors guarding Gibraltar, originally invented by alert Phoenician businessmen. It is only a little sea slug, a snaillike animal. Sea slugs normally have chunky bodies and *Scyllaea* is no exception. But *Scyllaea* has folds and flaps of skin which others do not have, folds and flaps of skin that look like branches of sargassum and that make the body appear as just a tangled clump of such branches. Looked upon with the eyes of a creature of a quarter its size *Scyllaea* has received its horrible name deservedly for it is insatiable and voracious, but to human eyes it looks mainly amusing.

The giant octopi that were the prototype of the Homeric Scylla seem to be lacking in the Sargasso Sea—the water is probably too deep for them—but small octopi can be had in large numbers. The same goes for jellyfish, especially the dreaded Portuguese man-of-war is quite frequent. And two types of strange creatures of the Sargasso Sea deserve special mention: the water fleas and *Halobates.* The water fleas are, of course, tiny crablike animals, like those Daphnia that form the staple diet of the tropical fish in your aquarium. The Sargasso Sea water fleas, at least some varieties, have a special characteristic, they have enormous eyes. Nobody knows why, especially since the Sargasso Sea has probably the clearest water in the world, but it is a fact that some of them do not look like little creatures with large eyes, but like a pair of large eyes with some appendages.

Halobates, on the other hand, is something that should not live in the Sargasso Sea at all. It is an insect, and insects shun the sea, even though many insects go through a larval stage that is spent in and under water. And many insects may be found in, near and around water even when adults, but it is always fresh water, there is no such thing as a marine insect. None, that is, expect *Halobates,* but even he does not live in the sea but on top of it. *Halobates* is a water strider; with six long hairy legs the insect runs over the surface of the sea, occasionally resting on an exposed part of a clump of seaweed. *Halobates* reproduces by means of eggs which are laid on top, not of seaweed which may sink, but of floating bird feathers. In spite of a life in watery surroundings, sometimes thousands of miles from the nearest land, *Halobates* still dots not like water, it just lives there, grouchingly, in an almost-contact with the sea.

I know, all this sounds rather interesting and may concede that the Sargasso Sea is a place of beauty instead of horror and that it must be an inexhaustible field of study for oceanographers, zoologists in general and ichthyologists in particular. But it also sounds just a little bit disappointing, one would expect at least a few minor miracles from a place as strange as the Sargasso Sea. A seaweed that has no method of reproduction, a number of small sea creatures that camouflage themselves as seaweed and a water-shunning insect that lives surrounded by the ocean are fine, but not quite enough.

This demand for a few Sargasso miracles can be satisfied, in fact they are major and not minor miracles. But they were not easy to discover and turned out to be of unusual nature. And they all have to do with the hatching of young fish—the Sargasso Sea is the greatest fish nursery on our planet.

The story involves mainly three kinds of fishes, as different in appearance as possible. We'll start out with the flying fish. Some seventy years ago Louis Agassiz, then at the height of his fame, announced that a clump of sargassum had been fished up that was wound round and round with something resembling a pearl necklace, a string of fish eggs. Agassiz thought that they were the eggs of the Sargassumfish, known in scientific circles as *Pterophryne*. Since Pterophryne is one of the main features of fish life in the Sargasso Sea that conclusion sounded reasonable enough. And every once in a while when a vessel crossed the Sargasso Sea and fished weeds with strings of fish eggs attached to them from the warm blue water it was taken for granted that these strings were proof for Pterophryne's reproductive activities. But then, in 1925, William Beebe let a string of these eggs hatch under close observation—and out came young *Exonautes,* a variety of flying fish!

It is known that this whole section of the Atlantic Ocean, not only the Sargasso Sea proper, is teeming with flying fish. They are as numerous as butterflies and beetles over a stretch of waste land on a hot day and it could be taken for granted that they would produce eggs in large quantities. The find that the numerous fish eggs cluttering up sargassum weed were eggs of flying fish confirmed this thought and it showed, at the same time, where they were laid. Flying fish are surface fish with a pronounced love for warm water. The eggs of those fish share that love, they do not develop when they get into cold water. But even a tropical sea is warm only at and near the surface, a hundred fathoms down it gets cold and colder and the bottom temperature is about the same all over the globe, some three to four degrees centigrade above freezing point, normally four degrees, at which temperature water is at its densest.

Since most of the area over which flying fish can be found is deep water their eggs would not hatch. They are heavier than water and would sink to the bottom—everything heavier than water settles down to the bottom, no matter how deep the ocean, it is another one of those sea fables that it does not—if it were not for sargassum. Sargassum, equipped with countless air-filled bladders, stays at the surface and the buoyancy of the bladders is sufficient to carry a few hundreds of fish eggs too.

These facts indicate that the vast majority of all flying fish in and over the Atlantic were hatched in the Sargasso Sea. This alone might suffice to make the Sargasso Sea the biggest fish hatchery in the world, but it is only the beginning of the story.

The Sargassumfish breeds there too, of course. When fully grown—about four inches in length although they continue to grow to about six inches maximum—the fish produces a long string of gelatinous matter, containing roughly two thousand eggs. The gelatinous string absorbs water thirstily and swells to ten times its original volume. It then looks and feels like a lump of quivering jelly. The mystery is—but it is first necessary to describe Pterophryne.

There exists a fairy tale about a tailor who asked his fairy godmother for the magic gift of being able to stretch cloth. He got that gift and thereafter, when a customer brought him four yards of cloth he stretched it to forty yards, with a nice profit to himself. Of course the story found an unhappy ending because one day, disturbed by a fly, the tailor pulled his own nose by mistake. If you imagine that that tailor, in an idle hour, played around with a fish of normal shape and figure, you have an idea of how Pterophyrne looks now. The fins are pulled out a bit here and there, the skin forms unreasonable flaps and semiappendages and the whole thing is somewhat out of shape. And after the tailor got through playing with his unlucky female fish and viewed the result with mild horror he went to the Camouflage Department of the United

States Army, got hold of one of the artists employed there and said: "Look, I made a mistake with that fish; paint it away, please." Whereupon the artist got to work and decorated the former fish with stripes and bands the color of sargassum weed and passed it on to the navy to have it dropped into the Sargasso Sea where it is densest.

Pterophryne looks precisely as if it had undergone such half magic and half scientific treatment. The camouflage is perfect and it has to be because Pterophryne's appetite never slackens for even one minute. The strangely shaped and perfectly color-blended main representative of the fish fauna of the Sargossa Sea eats whatever comes in front of its mouth. If a bigger fish tries to swallow it, Pterophryne has a nice system of defense: it swallows sea water rapidly and in big gulps so that it swells up considerably. This method does not only possess a considerable surprise effect, it also converts the fish into a very prickly bite of sea food, usually the bigger robber lets go. Pterophryne does not like to be eaten, but it likes to eat. Everything that is not vegetable in origin is considered edible, including other and smaller specimens of Pterophryne.

The scientist Hugo Smith saw a six-inch Pterophryne swallow one of four inches in one gulp—the smaller one tried the water-gulping trick, but to no avail. It is about as if a full-grown man swallowed a full-grown Great Dane at one gulp—but Pterophryne "did not seem particularly incommoded thereby."

William Beebe observed something rather similar while on his "Arcturus Adventure." They had caught three Sargassumfish and put them in a jar with sea water.

> **There had been three, sized like the three bears, but after half an hour we found that an inverted magician's trick had been performed—to my astonishment, where there were three, was now but one—a Pterophryne, very fat and gulping uneasily. The awful truth dawned upon us, but we never settled whether it was a case of Japanese boxes, each within the other, or whether the big cannibal had in turn engulfed his spiny and much tentacled brethren.**

I should add, as a statement of fact, that all these Sargassumfish were females. But that does not prove anything for or against the better nature of the males, because *all* Sargassumfish ever caught were females. Nobody has ever seen a male. It is also true that many Pterophryne eggs fished from the ocean were not fertilized and did not hatch—but there must be males somewhere because the Sargasso Sea is also full of young specimens of Pterophryne. There exists a suspicion about that, but so far it has not been verified.

Pterophryne has relatives elsewhere, the anglerfish—Lophius—which produce eggs behaving very similar to those of Pterophryne. But Lophius, an inhabitant of northern cold-water seas, leads a normal family life. To find something more unusual we have to go a step farther and look at the deep-sea relatives of the anglerfish, the sea devils. For a long time only female sea devils were known—later it was found that male sea devils had been caught in quantities too, but had not been recognized. In fact they had been caught together with the females—because the male sea devils are tiny things, completely degenerate that are grown to the bodies of the females, leading a parasitic life.

Whether things are similar with Pterophryne nobody knows and nobody dares to guess, so far as the result of all searches has been perfectly negative. But no matter what the method will turn out to be, you can add countless millions of Pterophryne to the fish that were hatched in the Sargasso Sea.

The last part of the story centers around the name of a Danish ichthyologist, Dr. Johannes Schmidt. Dr. Schmidt had no intentions to investigate the Sargasso Sea at the expense of the King of Denmark, but that is what finally happened because Schmidt was trailing a fish of his own native country and the trail ended in or rather under the Sargasso Sea.

The fish trailed by Dr. Schmidt was *Anguilla anguilla,* then called *Anguilla vulgaris,* the common European river eel, next cousin to the common American eel, *Anguilla rostrata* or *Anguilla chrysypa,* if you follow a more recent system of classification. Incidentally, they are so much alike that nobody can tell them apart from just looking at them, other methods are needed to distinguish them, methods we'll discuss soon.

Before he began his researches Dr. Schmidt knew as much about eels as any fisherman in Denmark or in Europe generally. He knew that eels live in fresh water during what appears to be the greater part of their lives, that they seem to be able to cross short stretches of land when the grass is wet with a heavy dew and that they are fully grown and especially fat when their ordinarily darkish color turns silvery. When that happens they are ready to embark on a down-river journey to the sea, usually in fall. He knew that young eels would come out of the sea the next spring, swim up river and wax fat during the following years. He knew—this was a little above the knowledge of most fishermen—that male eels begin to turn silvery when between twelve and twenty inches long, which is from four and one half to eight and one half years after they came from the sea as elvers or glass eels. The females would be ready for the journey when between fourteen and twenty-six inches in length, ten and one half to twelve and one half years after the elver stage.*

And he knew, what most fishermen did not know, that the eels underwent another stage, before they emerged from the sea as glass eels. This stage is a strange one, and it is not surprising that a mistake had been made about it before the true connections became known.

In 1856 a naturalist by the name of Kaup had caught and described a most interesting small salt-water fish. It looked like a laurel leaf, just short of three inches in length and perfectly transparent, as if formed of almost clear glass. Kaup did not know anything about this fish but its appearance and the fact that it could not be found in any scientific book on fishes. Being its first scientific discoverer it was up to him to give it a scientific name. He did this in christening the strange little fish *Leptocephalus.*

Many years later, in 1890, two Italian ichthyologists, Grassi and Calandruccio, came across Kaup's description of Leptocephalus and decided to find out details of its habits of life; there was a fairly steady supply of these little fish available to them. Still the investigation had to wait because of other work, but in 1895 Grassi and Calandruccio found themselves with some spare time and they went to work on Leptocephalus. The first step was, obviously, to catch a number of them, put them in an aquarium with sea water and watch them live. To their surprise the biggest of their Leptocephali, all of seventy millimeters long, began to shrink after some time. They got shorter by about ten millimeters and narrower at the same time. And like a tadpole changes into a small frog with fair suddenness after a long period of hesitation the Leptocephali changed into little eels, glass eels.

Dr. Schmidt knew Leptocephalus, the leaflike larval stage of the common eel—European as well as American—well. During a minor expedition in the northern parts of the North Sea he caught one himself. This was in itself not very surprising, but the Leptocephalus had been caught near the Faer-Oer Islands, farther north than ever before. When he reported this catch to the Danish Academy, the Danish Government decided that a more thorough investigation of the wanderings of eel larvae was indicated. Dr. Schmidt received the rather large order to find out about eels, everything that could be found out. It was a long and tedious job; Dr. Schmidt worked on it with few interruptions from 1904 to 1922. It was also much more expensive than the Danish Government had thought at first, but the research, as pure research always does, yielded economic results.

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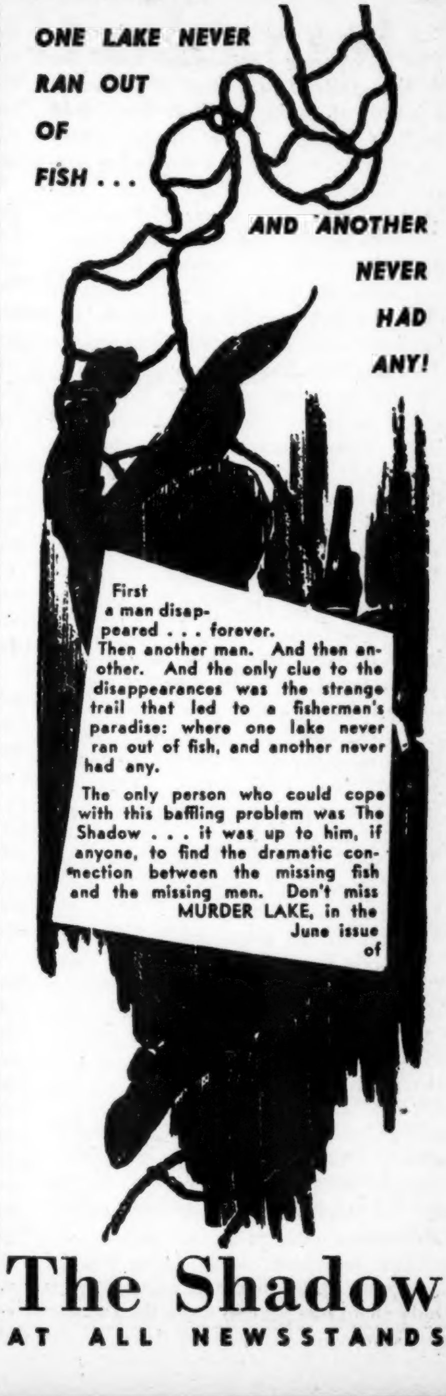
* Eels can grow much larger on occasion. Three-foot females ten and one half to twelve and one half years old are not rare, and five-foot specimens, weighing twenty pounds, have been caught.

Schmidt went about it, in about the following manner. At first he fished the North Sea off the Danish and German coasts for young metamorphosed eels. A little farther out large Leptocephali began to appear. Still farther out they were a little smaller—but seasonal variations had to be kept in mind, of course. It seemed as if all the Leptocephali came from the Atlantic, entering either through the English Channel or via the Northern route around Scotland. Schmidt reported that he believed that the eels traveled with the Gulf Stream, if he was correct he would find smaller and smaller Leptocephali if he traveled against the Gulf Stream into the Atlantic Ocean. But for that work he needed a bigger ship which could, if necessary, weather the storms of the high seas and which was roomy enough for a small research staff and all the paraphernalia of oceanographic research.

After a short delay he got such a ship and sailed out into the Atlantic always against the Gulf Stream. Leptocephali? Sure! Smaller and smaller ones all the time, the first guess had been correct. He was hardly surprised when the trail led him into the Sargasso Sea, to a point south of the Bermudas, not very far from the American mainland.

This being the case the question of whether the Leptocephali were larvae of American or of European eels became important. There was a way to decide


ONE LAKE NEVER RAN OUT OF FISH . . .

AND ANOTHER NEVER HAD ANY!

First a man disappeared . . . forever. Then another man. And then another. And the only clue to the disappearances was the strange trail that led to a fisherman's paradise: where one lake never ran out of fish, and another never had any.

The only person who could cope with this baffling problem was The Shadow . . . it was up to him, if anyone, to find the dramatic connection between the missing fish and the missing men. Don't miss MURDER LAKE, in the June issue of

The Shadow

AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

that question, but it was no pleasure. The very young Leptocephali could not be distinguished, but when they reached a length of about one inch they could be told apart. Those living glassy laurel leaves consist of a number of segments—later vertebrae—which furnished a clue. The larvae of European *Anguilla anguilla* had normally one hundred thirteen to one hundred seventeen segments, those of American *Anguilla chrysypa* had one hundred six to one hundred nine segments. Occasionally the Americans had a few less—down to one hundred four—and the Europeans a few more—up to one hundred nineteen. Things became difficult when the Europeans had less than normal and the Americans more. They met at one hundred eleven segments—there were, all in all, six or seven with that number. They could not be classified.

The results of Dr. Schmidt's work, in condensed form, are as follows: Both kinds of river eels, American as well as European are to be regarded as immature deep-sea fish which spent their childhood and their short adult life in the seas, but their extended period of adolescence in fresh water. When mature the eels go back to the place where they were hatched, the Sargasso Sea. They meet there and mate—Americans and Europeans in neighboring but separate camps—and then die. The eggs are laid in the deep water below the Sargasso Sea and hatch there, even though the water near the bottom is cold. Once hatched they come to the surface and drift with the Gulf Stream. The Leptocephali of the European kind need two and one half years for the journey to the North Sea, during that period they grow from ten to seventy-five millometers. Then they change into elvers or glass eels and enter fresh water.

The American variety, being hatched so much closer to the mainland, needs only about one year to make the journey and grows to about the same dimensions during that shorter period. Otherwise everything works the same way, there are no differences save for the quicker rate of growth and the different number of sergents.

Nobody knows how such an adaptation came about. Why did the European eels, if they have to breed in salt water of great depth, go all the way to the Sargasso Sea to do it. One should think that they might just as well go to the first deep spot in the Atlantic, near the European shore. Why do the American eels insist on going to the Sargasso Sea, they have deep ocean only a score of miles from the mouths of the big rivers. Obviously the sargassum weed has nothing to do with it, the breeding takes place far below this surface phenomenon. When the young Leptocephali are already nearly three tenths of an inch or so long, they are still found one thousand feet below the surface.

Do these habits of the eels point to the theory that the continents drifted apart in geologic times, that the Atlantic is only a "crack" between the Old World and the New and that the home of the eel was always the bottom below the Sargasso Sea? It does look like it, but it is probably not true just the same, there are too many weighty reasons speaking against so late a separation of the Old and the New World.

We do not know the reason why eels go on transatlantic or coastwise journeys to spawn. We know that is it a fact, but the "why" of it is even more mysterious than the problem of Pterophryne's husbands. But I think that all this will console those who dreamed of an "isle of lost vessel" in the midst of the Sargasso Sea and who were disappointed to hear that the Sargasso Sea of fable does not exist. There is a much bigger mystery hidden there, but not in the sea itself but on the bottom, far below the reason where Columbus made the entry ***vieron muchas yerbas.***

THE END.

Gather, Darkness!

by Fritz Leiber, Jr.

Second of three parts. The Hierarchy's phony religion was a super-scientific autocracy—but the super-scientific rebellion masqueraded as the dizziest Witchcraft old Earth had ever seen!

Illustrated by Kramer

SYNOPSIS

Believing mankind to be in danger of reverting to barbarism, the scientists of the far future take control of the world by establishing a fake religion, in which miracles are accomplished by scientific means. Their rule speedily becomes a tyranny of the very worst sort. The priest-scientists of the Hierarchy live in luxurious, well-fortified sanctuaries. They are recruited from the most intelligent young men of each generation, who are given a thorough re-education on becoming priests. The bulk of mankind are Commoners, whose cultural status is that of the serfs of feudal times. Their lot is one of degrading drudgery. They live in fear and awe of the Great God and the scarlet-clad priests, who are protected by individual force-fields, known as robes of Inviolability, and who possess many supposedly supernatural weapons, including the wrath ray.

The only serious opposition to the Hierarchy comes from the Witchcraft. Presumably a handful of ignorant and superstitious old women, the Witchcraft has recently become the front for a shadowy organization which has terrified the Commoners and even shaken the skepticism of the lower-ranking priests. This inner organization avowedly serves Sathanas, God of Evil. It resembles the witchcraft of the Middle Ages, especially in its reputed employment of familiars—tiny, furry, manlike monsters which live on witch's blood.

At Megatheopolis, chief city of Earth, an idealistic and hot-headed young priest named Jarles challenges the Hierarchy and proclaims to the Commoners that the Great God is a fake. Just as he is about to be blasted by a giant wrath ray from the animated image of the Great God atop the Cathedral, there is a gale of evil laughter and he is snatched up by something having the appearance of two huge black hands. He finds himself at a meeting of witches, among them Sharlson Naurya, the woman he loves. Their leader, the Black Man, proposes that Jarles join forces with them. Despite Naurya's pleas, Jarles refuses, on the grounds that they are fostering superstition and he cannot be sure of their motives. So he is cast out and *almost meets his death at the hands of a pack of Commoners and deacons—professional bullies employed by the Hierarchy. Badly wounded, he is rescued and nursed by one of the old, ignorant witches, a hard-bitten crone named Mother Jujy.*

The Black Man is not the ultimate leader of the inner Witchcraft. He receives his instructions from a mysterious being who calls himself Asmodeus, but about whom nothing further is known. However, the Black Man is high in the organization. He operates the telesolidograph, an instrument for projecting three-dimensional motion pictures and so creating apparent phantoms. He is provided with a garment which absorbs all visible radiation and appears dead black. He is an efficient yet devil-may-care young man, with a love of grim jokes. Like all the witches, he is a Commoner and leads a double life. He, too, is attracted to Sharlson Naurya, whom he rescued from Brother Chulian, a selfish and rather babyish priest sent to arrest her.

Sharlson Naurya is ordered to remain at the hidden headquarters of the Witchcraft. Apparently Asmodeus is reserving her for some very special mission.

Under Asmodeus' instructions, the Black Man and the world-wide organization of the inner Witchcraft are waging against the Hierarchy an ever-increasing war, not of physical force, but of psychological terror.

Meanwhile the Hierarchy, and especially its leadership, is split into three factions. The Realists, who advocate ruthless methods, especially with regard to the stamping out of the organization threatening the Hierarchy. The Moderates, led by the archpriest Frejeris—traditionalists, ultraconservatives, who minimize the danger. And, led by the archpriest Sercival, the Fanatics, a tiny party of elderly priests, whose minds have apparently become so inflamed with the grandeur of the Hierarchy that they actually believe in the existence of the Great God.

At present the Realists are in the saddle. The archpriest Goniface is their chief voice in the Apex Council, executive organ of the Hierarchy. Goniface is a brilliant and ambitious opportunist, a man of strong and ruthless character. He is keenly aware of the Hierarchy's danger and has spared no effort to shock the more conservative archpriests into realizing it. He hopes, besides, to seize supreme authority during the approaching crisis. He has a private organization within the Hierarchy. His chief agent is Cousin Deth, a cruel and cynical deacon.

Goniface is much startled at sight of a solidographic picture of Sharlson Naurya, who has been posing as a weaver in her life among the Commoners. He is afraid of her, for some reason connected with his past. He sends Cousin Deth to get hold of her at all costs, but she has been spirited away by the Black Man. Further attempts to track her down have thus far failed.

VIII.

Up from the black infinite abyss of sleep shot the archpriest Goniface.

First a dream. A dream so deep, so primal, that it lacked vision and sound. Horror. A writhing in darkness that was himself. Restraint. Himself struggling futilely against it. Deep, pricking pain. Something essential being cut from him, to be used against him. It was his secret, his one and only weakness. It could destroy him. A spasm of convulsive, futile and horror-stricken writhing.

Then a more definite dream. He wandered among the corpses of those he had killed because they knew his secret. Very white and stiff and still they seemed, each laid out on its table under a glaring light, and he felt very safe. Then, three tables away, one sat up suddenly. An immature girl with dark hair streaming over her marble shoulders. She pointed at him and her mouth opened and she said, "Your name is Knowles Satrick. You are the son of a priest. Your mother was a Fallen Sister. You have trangressed the most jealously enforced law of the Hierarchy. You are an impostor." He ran toward her, to force her down again and shut her mouth. But just as his fingers touched her, she slipped away from him. Around and between the tables he pursued her. Some were overturned. He stumbled over his mother's corpse. Around and around. Staggering. Gasping. And still she eluded him, crying all the while in a loud voice, "Drag down the archpriest Goniface! His name is Knowles Satrick! His father was a priest!" And the mouths of all the corpses opened and they began to cry loudly, "Knowles Satrick! Priest's son!" until the whole world was screaming it at him and there were a thousand hands upon him. And suddenly he was a boy again, and his mother was bitterly muttering, "Priest's son!" to shame him.

Then memories, close to the surface of awakening. The white, upturned face of his half sister, Geryl, with the dark hair streaming upward around it, as she fell from the bridge into the dark, distant torrent below. His secret wholly safe at last. Then the Apex Council Chamber and the solidographic miniature of a mature woman, whose face wore that same expression of hate and implacable purpose as he had glimpsed on the face of that immature girl, as she fell toward the torrent. The same face. Geryl. Sharlson Naurya. His secret come alive.

Then illusion. He was where he should be, in his chamber at the Sanctuary. Gray darkness let him see the outlines of the room and silhouetted, at the foot of his bed, a grotesque anthropid shape, skinnier than any monkey, but furry-seeming. Only for a moment was it visible. It dropped out of sight, and there came the faintest pattering of tiny paws.

Then full wakefulness. He sat up, breathing a little heavily, his eyes refamiliarizing themselves with the shape of his room, putting every object in its right place in the semidarkness. Odd, how that last brief dream had reproduced the outlines of his room almost as they were in reality. But there were dreams like that. Perhaps the rural priests, with their talk of furry things which squatted on their chests, had been responsible for that last dream-imagining.

He fancied a slight pain in his back—another dream echo.

Unpleasant, that the memory of his past deeds should sometimes pry its way into his dreams. But that was the way the human mind was constituted. Nothing could ever be wholly forgotten.

And what difference did it make? After all, the secret of his birth was no longer of great importance. It had been, when he was a First Circle priest. But now he was too powerful to be dragged down, or even seriously endangered, by any such accusation.

Still, if Geryl had actually escaped, and if Geryl were Sharlson Naurya, and if the Moderates got their hands on her, they could make it embarrassing for him. Best that Deth should find her and put her out of the way.

It seemed she was in the Witchcraft. Did the Witchcraft, then, know of her relationship to him and plan to use her against him? If that were true, why had she been spirited away? What good was she, except to accuse him openly of being a priest's son and having entered the Hierarchy illegitimately?

As Goniface pondered, the range of his thinking widened, until, almost before he was aware of it, he was surveying in imagination the vast empire of the Hierarchy.

Out there in the darkness—and on the day-side of Earth, too—something was gnawing at that empire, as mice might gnaw at the strands of some vast net. The New Witchcraft, every day growing bolder. Creeping from farm-land to town and from town to city. Only yesterday striking in the Cathedral itself.

Most of all his thoughts were concerned with the problem of the Witchcraft's leadership. That fascinated him. Out there, somewhere, was a mind daring enough to challenge the Hierarchy. Clever enough to hit upon the Witchcraft as the best secret means of striking at the Hierarchy's prestige and employing its own weapon of fear against it. Ingenious enough to have grafted several improvements onto Hierarchic science—for the Fifth Circle research workers were certain now that a long-range solidograph of some sort was being employed and hoped to duplicate the invention shortly. Patient enough to be able to work by fear alone, avoiding all hotheaded violence.

Beyond all else, the identity of that mind fascinated Goniface. Did it come from beyond Earth? That was barely conceivable. Or should he look for it closer at home?

He would like to meet that mind. Or had he, already?

At all events, an enemy worth fighting. Not that he had any real chance of winning out against the Hierarchy. Goniface had anticipated his next moves, and undercut subtlety with subtlety. Already dozens of the new witches had been marked down by Hierarchic agents. When the net was a bit fuller, when they had a little better line on the enemy leadership, it would be jerked up. After that—action, swift and deadly, stamping out the whole organization in a matter of days.

Yes, the waiting game was the right answer. Give the enemy a little rope. That priest Jarles, for instance. It was convenient that Jarles had escaped.

Meanwhile, though, outside there, something was gnawing. Fear was spreading through the lesser Sanctuaries, like a dirty stain. Goniface was moved to check over in his mind the various precautions and countermeasures that had been taken, the plans and alternate plans that were being held in readiness, the program of activities that was being undertaken by the Hierarchic espionage and his own semi-independent organization under Cousin Deth.

He was satisfied.

The only real danger lay in the Hierarchy itself—the flabby and temporizing policies advocated by the wishful-thinking Moderates. The Realists ruled the Apex Council—and Goniface was daily achieving a greater ascendancy over them—but most of the Realists still resembled the Moderates in being conservative mentalities, unwilling to work along new lines, apt to balk when asked to make swift decisions. The stamping-out process, after the waiting game was over, would necessitate considerable violence. And the Moderates would object strenuously to any employment of violence unsanctioned by tradition.

Yes, that was the real danger.

At the same time it represented an opportunity for Goniface to seize the supreme power he had long been aiming at.

For a long time he thought about the Moderates, especially their leader, Brother Frejeris. And his thoughts probed deep.

Eventually he was interrupted. One of the televisor panels beside his bed flashed on, and there appeared the face of one of the Fourth Circle priests on duty at Web Center.

"I am sorry to disturb your archpriestship—" he began.

"What is it?"

"It began approximately an hour ago. A sudden, sharp increase in all manifestations of the Witchcraft. Communications have been coming in from all over the planet. There have been panics in several rural Sanctuaries and at least two have been deserted by their occupant priests. There is a confused and ambiguous message from Neodelos.

Beasts of some sort, or phantasms of beasts, have been reported in and about this city. Many local priests report hallucinations—or persecutions of some sort—and clamor for treatment. There has been a riot or panic in the dormitory of the novices."

"Can you inform me," inquired Goniface, "if the countermeasures covering this type of emergency have been put into action?"

The face in the televisor nodded. "To the best of my knowledge, they have. But the Chief of Communications desires to consult with you. Shall I flash him on?"

"No," said Goniface. "I'll come down."

The televisor flicked off. Goniface touched a switch, and soft light flooded his spacious cell, with its Spartan luxury.

A faint misgiving rippled for a moment in the surface of his mind. It did not concern the Witchcraft, but the priests at Web Center. Such men represented a kind of weakness. They were a little too inclined to look to their superiors for help.

Too much, perhaps, depended personally on himself. If something should happen to him—

But power was too precious a thing to be shared with others. And the Hierarchy functioned best when it had one head. And in any case there were a number of competent Realist archpriests, like Jomald, quite capable of taking over if he should ever be eliminated.

He rose quickly from the couch, then—moved by a sudden impulse—looked back.

He immediately remembered the stinging pain he had felt momentarily in his dream.

For near the head of the couch, just about where his shoulders had lain, was another echo from his dream—an echo of a very different sort.

A small spot of blood.

IX.

The second night of fear had settled on Megatheopolis, imparting a shuddering menace to the curfew-darkness and the curfew-silence. That day special prayers had been addressed to the Great God, both in the Cathedral and the chapels, for protection against the forces of evil. Tales of strange phantasms, which last night had defied even priests, were whispered everywhere. More Commoners had clamored to confess their sins than the priests could take care of. Before being dispersed, an hysterical mob had torn to pieces two old crones, known to be witches. Each man looked with suspicion on his neighbor, wondering if he might not be in league with Sathanas. An hour before curfew, the streets were almost deserted.

Along those mazy streets, staying close to the squat rooftops, the Black Man floated, relishing the atmosphere of terror and suspense, just as an actor enjoys knowing that the play in which he has a part is going well. Over the Cathedral, the halo of the Great God glowed with a double brilliance, and the whole Sanctuary was ablaze with lights. A few streets away the search beam of a patrol of deacons moved about restlessly, uneasily. But in between all was darkness.

As a swimmer in darkness, the Black Man moved, poling himself along by varying the direction and intensity of the pencils of force emanating from his forearms. The repulsor field generated by the garment he wore, skin-tight over his whole body, was sufficient to counteract gravity at this slight elevation. The field also had the property—save at the whorl points over sense organs—of absorbing all radiant energy that impinged upon it. This radiant energy in turn helped power the field.

Technically he was off duty. An hour ago he had finally been relieved at the telesolidograph by another operator—there was a shortage of operators now that they had two projectors working—and had satisfied himself that as much of the general plan as he knew was progressing satisfactorily. But after that, like an actor who is off stage for a time, he had been unable to resist the temptation to sneak out in front and see how the play was going.

He had an excuse of sorts. Word had come from Mother Jujy that Armon Jarles intended this night to attempt to recontact the New Witchcraft. Meanwhile, Mother Jujy was retiring into her tunnels "until the mobs gets a little less frisky."

Of course, he could have sent someone to pick up Armon Jarles at Mother Jujy's. But with a man as peculiarly stubborn as Armon Jarles, it was well to let him take the initiative, so there could be no question but that he was acting of his own free will. And it was dramatically more pleasing that Armon Jarles should go to the appointed rendezvous on the edge of the Great Square, the spot where he had been cast out from the Witchcraft. The Black Man looked forward to the moment when he would swoop down beside the renegade priest.

Meanwhile, he trailed him, to make sure he didn't get into trouble, hovering noiselessly above while Armon Jarles, clad as a lowly Commoner, stole furtively through the narrowest streets and alleys, seeking the deepest shadows, stepping carefully to avoid the mouths of the drains, stopping at intervals to spy warily for patrols, frequently glancing over his shoulder, but quite unaware of his guardian demon overhead.

They were nearing the Great Square. The Black Man was tempted to put an end to this rather purposeless pilgrimage, but was held back by his love of dramatic denouements. The fun would be over soon enough.

Bobbing violet rings warned of the approach of two priests bound on some nocturnal mission. Jarles hesitated, then shrank back into a narrow passageway between two buildings. The Black Man sank gently to the edge of the roof above, alert for emergencies.

But the two priests hurried unconcernedly on. As they neared the passageway, the Black Man felt a start of pleasure. He had recognized the smaller, dumpier priest as the little fellow whom he had so thoroughly scared, in front of the haunted house, with the Black Veil, and later, inside the place, with a nastily animated couch. His feeling toward Brother Chulian was one almost of affection. It would be too bad to miss this opportunity. Naurya said the little priest had been inordinately frightened by Puss, her familiar. It would only take a moment to switch off his repulsor field, set Dickon riding on the end of his force pencil—Dickon would like that—and dangle him in front of Chulian's face.

Almost before he had decided to, it was done. A tiny anthropoid shape was moving through the darkness, down a slant, toward the bobbing halos.

At this moment, the Black Man's mind was all mischief.

Then—ominous windy rushing in the darkness overhead and the emptiness of dismay at the pit of his stomach before he had time to reason why.

Wrench of his neck, as he slewed around to look behind and above, from where he rested on the edge of the roof.

Then—one frozen instant.

One frozen instant to taste bitter defeat, to curse his criminal carelessness, to damn himself as an adolescent prankster who would walk into any trap so long as it was baited with an opportunity for a practical joke, to remember the warnings and reprimands he had gently smiled at, to remember how he himself had lectured Drick, "You're not forgetting, are you, even for one fraction of a split instant, that we're up against the smartest, tightest—" to think, with poignant intensity, of what a swift blotting out was in store for the Witchcraft, if it were all manned by as reckless and negligent fools as himself—and he one of the top men.

One frozen instant to comprehend the thing swooping toward him. Its rigid, manlike form—but twice as long as a man. Legs stiffly extended, like a diver's. Arms threateningly outstretched, fingers spread like talons. Huge sculpturesque face, framed by great golden curls, handsome with the superhuman, unearthly beauty of some heroic painting, visible in a faint glow from the stern, staring eyes, which could flash forth death if they willed.

An angel.

Then—one whirling instant.

One whirling instant to repower his repulsor field, launching himself simultaneously down into the street—the angel was too close to permit a try over the roofs.

One whirling instant to swerve frantically from side to side of the street, like a low-lurking hawk pounced upon in turn by an eagle; to see the two priests ahead stop, but not time enough to see them turn around; to see slim Dickon, hurled from the force pencil, drop lightly near the mouth of a drain; to dart suddenly and swiftly upward toward the rooftops—but not suddenly or swiftly enough; to sense the angel banking upward with him and just above him; to feel its impact—stunning even though almost parallel to his own upward course; to feel, through his repulsor field, the cruel clutch of its mechancial arms, that were its grapples.

One whirling instant to think a command, with all the intensity he could summon, "The drain, Dickon, the drain! Make for the Sanctuary! Keep in contact—unconscious minds!" to sense in a dark corner of his mind the beginning of a ghostly answer, to see loom suddenly ahead a roof edge which the angel did not wholly avoid.

Then—one crashing, lasting, final instant of unconsciousness and darkness.

X.

Down a gray corridor in the crypts beneath the Sanctuary, two deacons escorted Jarles. This was a region shrouded in privacy, from which lower ranking priests were normally barred. All elevator shafts save one stopped two levels above. It was said that a great research of some sort, involving human beings, was conducted here. It was said that a new batch of Commoners was sent down here every day, and that each batch contained a high percentage of mentally defective and psychotic individuals. It was also said that most of them came up madder than when they descended.

That more than research might be involved was hinted by the rumor that recalcitrant and criminal priests were sometimes sent here, too.

Jarles tried to keep his mind from dwelling on the cruelly tantalizing mischance of his recapture by the Hierarchy at the very moment when he had become reconciled to the Witchcraft and was eagerly setting out to seek to join forces with it. But it was not easy. With a morbid, futile monotony his mind persisted in reliving those moments when he had crouched in the passageway while some confused aërial struggle was going on outside—he never learned what struggle or between whom. Crouched there until dark forms closed either end of the passageway and he had been dragged forth to confront the coldly smirking countenance of Cousin Deth.

Had they known all along that he was hidden at Mother Jujy's, and waited all that time before they struck?

Had someone chanced to recognize him as he stole through the darkened streets—one of those heartbreaking, one-in-a-million mischances against which the best precautions may prove vain?

Or—had Mother Jujy betrayed him? Or someone in the New Witchcraft, perhaps the Black Man? He must not even think of such a possibility! He had decided once and for all that they were on the side of good, that they represented the forces with which he had resolved to ally himself from henceforth on. He must not, dare not, suspect them.

One of the deacons pacing beside him spoke. Both men he knew to be underlings of Cousin Deth. For that matter, all those with whom he had come in contact since his capture, and whom he recognized, were underlings or associates of either Cousin Deth or his master, Goniface.

"I wonder how this one will be when he comes out?" the deacon asked speculatively. He had rather a coarse voice. "Laughing, d'you think? Or cryin? Or still-like? Or maybe wild? Last one I brought up kept laughing for hours."

His companion was not much interested. "Who knows? I've seen them all ways, and every one a bit different. Only one thing I'm sure of—Brother Dhomas will be glad to see him. Brother Dhomas is always happy when we bring him a new face."

"Yes, the old putterer! I wonder how our masters still use him. He messes up so many jobs."

"True, but his successes, when they do come, are something to talk about. Just think, we may be taking him one of his successes."

"I doubt it."

Torture. Jarles had been expecting that, and the deacons' talk, with its indefinite, shadowy implications, was somehow worse than any specific description of machinery for eliciting pain. The name of Brother Dhomas awakened in him a vague, disquieting recollection, as if he had once heard it in some peculiarly unpleasant connection.

At least there was little information they could get from him, even by torture. He knew almost nothing of the location of the room in which he had met the New Witchcraft, and almost nothing of its membership—save that Sharlson Naurya was one, and they knew that already. As for Mother Jujy, they must know all about her, too—and earlier tonight, before he left her, she had departed for some secret hide-out in the maze of Golden Age tunnels.

It would probably be worse for him, because he knew so little. He steeled himself. He was Armon Jarles, he told himself, lifelong enemy of the Hierarchy, and could never be anything else.

They approached an open door. Emanating from it, as chemical odors from a chemist's laboratory, Jarles sensed traces of various radiations affecting the human nervous system, like the sympathetics and parasympathetics used in the Cathedral and at confession, but more numerous and most of them unfamiliar to him. Like tiny ghostly hands they tugged at his emotions—alarming, reassuring, angering, soothing.

The deacons stopped. This was his destination.

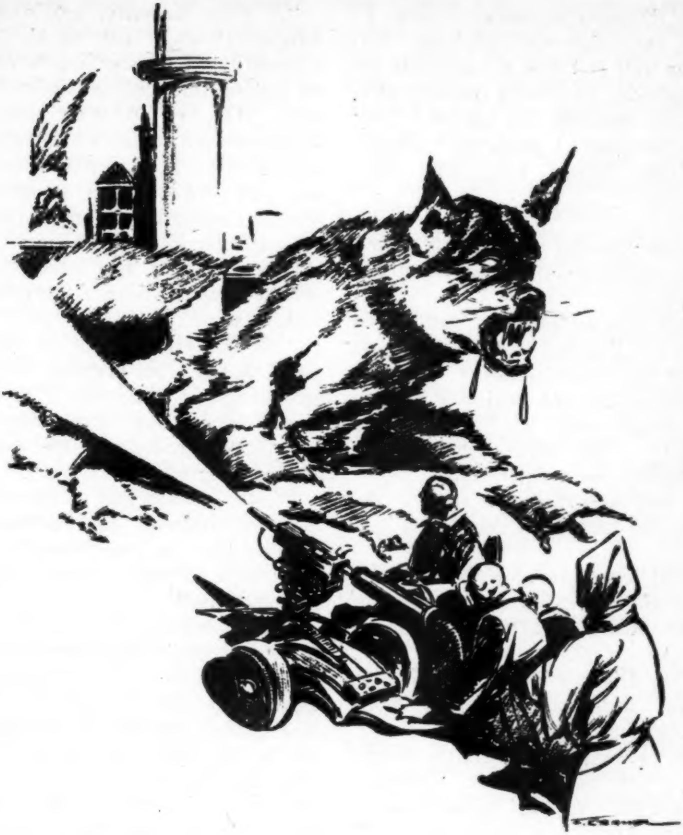
Nervously his eyes swept the room. They were first drawn, as to a focus, to a padded chair, provided with clamps. That was bad. But the mechanisms and instruments around about were those of a psychological laboratory. That was good.

Then a voice, obviously speaking for his benefit.

"That's right. You needn't be alarmed. We won't torture you physically. And as for mental torture, there's no such thing! There is only—experience."

It was the strangest voice, rapid yet deep, and lacking individuality. Human—but generalized. As if many people were speaking the same words in perfect rhythm with each other.

The eyes of Jarles, previously intent only on discovering the basic function of the room, went to the speaker. A quakingly fat priest whose baggy, dirty robe was emblazoned with the human brain and arabesque of equations in



psycho-sociology that distinguished the Sixth Circle.

From the emblazonment he looked up at the face. Strangely, the face was like the voice—generalized, despite the seemingly sharp individuality of double chins, thick, mobile lips, and scanty eyebrows. As if the solidographs of a dozen facially similar priests—but each a distinct person—had been projected into the same space, with a resultant canceling out of much of their individuality.

If any feature had more individuality than the rest, it was the eyes. They dwelt on Jarles engulfingly, thirstily, almost lovingly, as if he were the most interesting thing in the world. But not exactly because he was Armon Jarles, not exactly because he was an individual.

Those eyes held Jarles, so that it was with an effort that he looked away from them to the small man in black. Odd, that he had been able to look at the Sixth Circle priest without first noticing that Cousin Deth stood beside him.

"There he is, all ready for you, Brother Dhomas," said Cousin Deth. "And His Archpriestship Goniface requests me to warn you that this one must not be botched. He was too hard to get. There will be unpleasant consequences if you turn up a gibbering failure."

Without taking his eyes off Jarles,

Brother Dhomas answered swiftly.

"You can't scare me, little man. You know as well as I that my methods are still empirical, the results unpredictable. If a man is botched, he's botched! That is the agreement. I guarantee nothing."

"I have warned you," said Deth lightly.

Brother Dhomas approached Jarles, moving rather easily for one so abnormally fat.

"I have been studying your unabridged dossier and listening to the speech you made in the Great Square." He indicated the solidograph projector in front of the central chair, but his eyes never left Jarles. "You have a very interesting idealism—very interesting."

His tone was that of a surgeon describing an unusual tumor to a colleague.

"I will leave you now," said Deth. "And I will inform his archpriestship of your intention to treat this case merely as an experiment."

Brother Dhomas looked back at him. "Spiteful little reptile, aren't you? Your tight, self-infatuated mind interests me. I would like to get my fingers on it. Or your master, Goniface. There's a mind for you! What wouldn't I give to work on a mind like that!"

Cousin Deth's face froze, as if to set up a barrier against the prying, probing eyes. It was obvious that the words of Brother Dhomas affected him unpleasantly.

"Masks! Masks!" rumbled Brother Dhomas, with a hint of laughter. "Don't you know I like men who can mask their thoughts best of all? It gives me something to work against—makes the whole job more definite."

Cousin Deth walked out, followed by the two deacons who had come with Jarles.

Instantly the eyes were back on Jarles. And now they studied him with such intensity, seeming wholly to lose themselves in him, that they appeared almost vacuous.

"A great sincerity, too," continued Brother Dhomas, nodding his head, as if sincerity were something he could see by looking through the pupils of Jarles' eyes. "Oh, yes, and negativism. Very well developed negativism." He sounded as professionally pleased as a doctor who has just discovered a symptom that tends to support a favorable prognosis.

Jarles felt himself drawn by the incessantly peering, speculative eyes. He sensed danger. With a sharp effort he looked away.

"No, I'm not trying to hypnotize you," said Brother Dhomas, without interrupting his inspection. "Hypnotism would hinder my work, like a bad anæsthetic—deaden the reactions which I need to guide me."

Dimly Jarles began to sense the underlying character and motivations of Brother Dhomas, and those dim intimations were perhaps a little worse than the truth itself.

Most historical wars had been a boon to the sciences of medicine and surgery, making possible a rate of progress far more rapid than that in times of peace. The earliest prehistoric trepannings of the human skull were probably to relieve the pressure of fractures caused by club and sword. Daily the war doctor might treat more illuminating cases than he would meet in a life of peace-time practice—for any organism yields up its secrets more swiftly when it is possible to see it subjected to varied and extreme stresses and mutilation. Vivisections, sometimes forbidden by law, were performed by sword and shell—and on human beings.

The vast majority of war doctors were devoted to healing. The acquisition of knowledge, important as it was, remained a strictly subordinate factor.

But there were sometimes a few who placed knowledge before healing, and who found in the confusion of war and in their own increased authority an opportunity to put pet theories into practice.

As those human vampires preyed here

and there on the fringe of the battlefield, so Brother Dhomas preyed upon the mental derangements resulting from the psychological battle between Hierarchy and Witchcraft—as well as upon the more commonplace and "normal" derangements stimulated by the harsh, lie-based discipline of the Hierarchy.

As blood was to them, so fear was to Brother Dhomas. It made his bulbous nostrils twitch eagerly. Nothing so pleased him as the sight of a human being under extreme emotional stress. Or the feel—to him it had a definite texture—of a human mind distorted close to the breaking point.

As for pet theories, he had one—and it was more than a theory, too—that would make the doctor who lamed dozens in trying to cure their flat feet seem the most trivial tinkerer by comparison.

Brother Dhomas cared not a jot for the outcome of the struggle between Hierarchy and Witchcraft—or even the destiny of the Hierarchy. All that concerned him was getting his quota of sufficiently distorted minds. He hoped the struggle would last forever.

His silent inspection of Jarles—it was like a portrait painter studying a subject—eventually ended.

"And now—if you will seat yourself." He indicated the central chair.

Jarles noticed then that several priests had unobtrusively drawn close to him after the departure of the deacons. Emblems intertwining diagrams of the nervous system and circulatory system proclaimed them to be priests of the Third Circle, the circle of doctors and lesser psychiatrists.

Two of them grasped his elbows and turned him toward the chair. Wildly, violently, he began to struggle—but more to convince himself that he was still a man than because he had any hope of escape. His flailing fists knocked down one priest, but two others seized the arm and bore it down. Inexorably he was drawn to the central chair, forced down in it, the clamps fastened.

And all the while Brother Dhomas kept calling to him, "That's right! That's right! Struggle now. Get it over with. It will make it easier for me afterward."

The Third Circle priests stepped back. The chair was luxuriously comfortable. But the freedom of movement it left Jarles was very slight. He could not even turn his head.

Certain electrical and pneumatic recording instruments were attached to his body. Something was injected into his arm. Again Brother Dhomas read his suspicions.

"No, it's not a truth serum. Extracting the information you possess is merely a side issue. We want much more than the truth from you."

At that remark, Jarles stared questioningly, wonderingly, at Brother Dhomas, who had moved to a position directly in front of him, beyond the platform of the solidograph and a control bank.

"What is personality?" said Brother Dhomas, in a new tone, as if he were a lecturer and Jarles his audience. "That question was satisfactorily answered as early as the Dawn Civilization. Like mind itself, personality is merely a viewpoint, or a partially integrated system of viewpoints. Nothing more. Its material basis lies in certain neuronic gradients and potentials. Other than that, personality has no underlying unity.

"Viewpoints change. Why does not personality then change? The answer, of course, is that it does—but usually so gradually that it is not sensed as such. *Your* viewpoints have changed. Your dossier shows that they have changed more often, and to a much greater degree, than those of the average. Yet you think of yourself as essentially the same person. That raises a perplexing question."

He might have been speaking in the lecture hall. Yet Jarles' flesh crawled.

"For the thoughtful person, there is

no more baffling sensation than that called up by memory of viewpoints he has discarded. He remembers, perhaps in great detail, how he entertained those discarded viewpoints. But the old arguments no longer appeal to him—he has a new viewpoint which perhaps completely contradicts the old. And yet memory and a kind of intuition tell him that he was the same person then as now. And so we come back to the perplexing question.

"The answer is rather obvious, though unpleasant for those who like to believe there is some lasting, underlying unity in personality. Again I could quote the Dawn Civilization. 'Memory itself is the only unit possessed by personality.' That is another way of saying that a personality always has the same general neuronic base—though that base changes, too. Memory is the only link between past and present viewpoints, between viewpoints discarded and viewpoints retained.

"But memory can link—anything. Memory is cold and dispassionate. Memory is without morality. Think of the person that you most admire and the person you most detest. Imagine them as two stages in the life of one person. Imagine memory as linking those two stages. You see, even that is possible.

"Yes. personality changes. The problem is—to accelerate the change.

"You begin to see what we intend with regard to yourself? That's right! That's right!"

Almost desperately, Jarles sought to throw up some mental barrier against the probing of those studious, hungry, empty eyes.

"Yes," said Brother Dhomas, nodding. "It is better if you know exactly what is intended. Otherwise there would be too many variables in the empirical psychologic equation.

"I was quite correct in saying that we wanted much more than the truth. We want your personality. But it will not be robbery—only exchange. We will give you a new one for it."

Any mental barrier Jarles might have managed to set up was insufficient to prevent Brother Dhomas from reading—or guessing—his next fear.

"No, no, your present consciousness won't be snuffed out and replaced by another. That would be like killing you. You forget what I told you about memory. Personality will change, but memory—individual consciousness—will continue unbroken."

Almost, Jarles felt relief. At last he knew where the attack was coming and could marshal his forces. His hatred of the Hierarchy. His new-found loyalty to the Witchcraft—only it gave him a queer shiver to think that he could call it "new-found." His love of Naurya. His detestation of creatures like Cousin Deth. But, much more important than any of those, his firm belief in the right of every Commoner to freedom, equality, and a fair share in the world's riches—and his unswerving enmity to any group or individual who sought to tyrannize over them. Surely beliefs like that couldn't be changed. Other beliefs—about particular organizations or individuals—might change, according to what one knew about them. But a belief in human freedom was basic. It couldn't be changed. Brother Dhomas was bluffing.

"That's right," said Brother Dhomas, "it does seem impossible. But look at my face. Is it not that of a man who has transformed his own personality many times? Didn't you sense that as soon as you looked at me? As soon as you heard my voice? How else could I have gained the needful direct experience and skill, amounting in fanciful terms to a sixth sense, except by experimenting on myself? I haven't discovered telepathy, you know. My knowledge of the human mind—of your mind—is based on deductive skill and vast empirical knowledge, gained from—experience.

"I did not shrink from experimenting on my own mind. My sole regret is that I dare not change my personality sufficiently to interfere with my basic orientation as a research psychologist, that I can only taste the fringes of insanity—"

Those ceaselessly probing eyes had become, for Jarles, infinite abysses in which anything might lurk. But whatever Brother Dhomas said, he was bluffing. He admittedly hadn't changed his own basic personality. He couldn't change that of Jarles. He couldn't. He couldn't.

"That's right," said Brother Dhomas. "Be overconfident. It will make you more vulnerable when you begin to wonder. And now—action!"

Slowly, one by one at first, then more swiftly and many together, the various instruments in the room revealed their functions. Jarles was assaulted by sights, sounds, tastes, smells, touches, inward tensions. And by emotions. Emotions far more specific and intense than those produced by the sympathetics and parasympathetics with which Jarles was familiar. Perhaps the injection accounted for his greater susceptibility. He fought against them all. Locked his jaw, compresed his lips, to hold back a laughter that bore no relation to his thoughts. But it broke all barriers and burst forth in convulsive peals. Steeled himself against the reasonless tears that next began to flow. But still they flowed, and still he sobbed like one broken-hearted by some great grief. Fought the anger that tightened to a sickening knot beneath his chest, fought the fear that made his flesh prickle and teeth chatter, fought them all, but vainly. It was as if he had been dispossessed from his body and must impotently look on, tormented by a wholly mental desperation and a kind of mental shame, while Brother Dhomas elicited from his body all the responses of which it was capable, like an expert musician testing the range and capacities of an unfamiliar instrument.

For now the room was in semidarkness, and from a panel beside Brother Dhomas rose more than a dozen stubby pillars of different colored light, constantly fluctuating in rhythm with Jarles' physiological and neuro-physiological reactions. Ceaselessly Brother Dhomas' eyes went from them to Jarles and back again, while his pudgy fingers squirmed like white worms over the control panel, slowly, tentatively.

From emotion to thought, from body to mind, the invasion progressed. Jarles felt that his mind was like a planet, with consciousness the illuminated side, and an inexorable force was rotating it. Ideas he tried to grasp, to hold firm, abruptly slid into darkness and were gone, beyond thought's reach, like a word that is on the tip of the tongue yet cannot be remembered. And from the other side of his mind—the night side—emerged a host of things forgotten and undreamed of. Petty hates and envies that had once flickered for an instant in his mind and then been repressed. And memories. Memories of childhood. His first confession. Sharlson Naurya—a stranger girl who had just come to Megatheopolis from some other city. Fear of a bully. Fight with a bully. Work in the fields. Chores. Memories that went *too far back* into childhood. Himself lying in some box and goggling up at a world of giants. His mother's face bending over him—young again. Then a fearful twilight realm, in which all inanimate things had life and were symbols of unseen powers, and words were magical formulas to control them. And then there were no words, and the unseen powers become visible writhings, and there was no distinction between himself and the rest of the cosmos.

Slowly the dark memories retreated. Slowly the alien emotions ebbed from his flesh. For a while he was aware only of exhaustion, limpness. Then a growing jubilant relief. He was still

Armon Jarles. He still believed as before. Brother Dhomas had failed.

"No," said Brother Dhomas, "that was merely exploratory. A random groping for weak points in the armor of your personality. The stimulus tapes are now being automatically correlated with the tapes recording your reactions. The results will be illuminating. Though, to be honest with you, I work more by feel.

"Also, it was necessary that you gain —experience. A knowledge of your mind's hidden potentialities. Then you'll be able to work with me better. Against your own will, of course—resistance can be very helpful.

"The radiations, you see, change your neuronic gradients and potentials over neural areas whose limits and extent I can only know empirically. As a result, certain thoughts and memories are raised above, or depressed below, the threshold of consciousness, as the case may be.

"Your experience had shown you that any human mind has the wherewithal—if only in minutest traces—from which any kind of personality can be fabricated. Every person has experienced at one time or another fugitive flashes of hate and cruelty, which, if only sufficiently magnified and strengthened, would make him a murderous monster. Every person has, at least for one split second in his life, wanted to destroy the whole world. You see?

"It is only necessary to maneuver your mind into the desired state—that's where my maximum judgment and penetration are required—and then freeze your mind by a sudden intensification of the radiations, sufficient to change the neuronic gradients and potentials *permanently*. If I misjudge and freeze your mind while it is in a state of temporary insanity, that is unfortunate. If I weren't sure you would refuse, I would ask you to inform me when your mind reaches the desired state. As it is, I must depend on your involuntary collaboration.

"Our next exploration will be as purposive as the first was random. Action!"

Again the sensory bombardment, the emotional wrenching, the mental rotation. But because they were not so chaotic as the first time, they were not so instantly unnerving. In particular, the induced emotion was hardly troublesome at all—an odd mixture of fear and pleasure, promoting a watchful self-regard, so that for a moment he could smile with guarded contempt at Brother Dhomas.

But the sensations rapidly acquired a very specific and disturbing quality, though the induced emotions tended to make that disturbance chiefly mental. Where they had gotten that moving solidograph of himself, he could not say, but it was talking to him—himself to himself—and he heard his own voice repeating:

"Armon Jarles, there is only the cosmos and the electronic entities that constitute it, without soul or purpose, save so far as neuronic minds impose purpose upon it.

"Armon Jarles, the Hierarchy embodies the highest form of such purpose.

"Armon Jarles, the supernatural and the idealized have one trait in common. They are not. There is only reality."

Endlessly. Such statements, though, might have been patched up from recordings of his classroom recitations, his oral examinations. But then it dropped—still his own voice and image —into a more intimate key:

"Look at me, Armon Jarles. I am yourself as you will be when you have learned to see reality squarely and to disregard sentimental dreams. Look at me! I, Armon Jarles, laugh at you, Armon Jarles, for what you are now."

They must somehow have patched up even that, taking a word here and a phrase there, blending them with diabolic skill. He could never have said that! Or could he?

And now the solidographic Armon Jarles began to grimace at him with cruel cynicism. It must be—could only be—a prolonging of some fleeting expression they had searched out in some moving solidograph of him. But he hated it. He closed his eyes against it.

Swiftly an instrument was adjusted around his head. He felt a moderate, adhesive pressure on his eyelids. They were gently forced open. At regular intervals the instrument released its grip, permitting him to wink.

"We have no desire to torture you," came Brother Dhomas' voice across a lull in the auditory sensations. "Pain would provide a core round which you could concentrate your personality. We desire to disperse it."

Jarles could still look away from the hated portraiture of himself, but that did not keep him from seeing it dimly in the periphery of the retina—laughing, grimacing at him, and always talking.

And then once again repressed thoughts and memories began to slide from the inner darkness. And now they were all of a sort—anti-idealistic. They seemed to be marshaled like an army. The thoughts he clutched at, to use against them, melted away. Until he found the master thought—his belief in freedom and equal sharing, his hatred of all tyranny. And that thought, though its particular form of expression kept changing, did not vanish. It held the others at bay.

Again a lull in the sensory barrage, and Brother Dhomas speaking over it.

"What is idealism? It is distortion. A giving of false values to things which in reality do not possess those values. Personalities differ chiefly in their pattern of values. When the values are largely false, the personality is unstable."

Back then, into the churning inward darkness. Back once again, to the struggle against the forces of anti-idealism. Freedom and equality were right! But why? Why did man deserve them more than any other animal? Because man was a higher form of life? But to be higher only meant to be more complex, and what virtue was there in complexity? Why should all men deserve freedom and equality? Why not just a few? It was wholly arbitrary. The whole concept of deserving was an idealistic fiction. One either had something or hadn't it. One either wanted something or didn't want it. There was no such thing as deserving something.

Frantically Jarles strove to reanimate the concepts in which he had always believed. When this type of reasoning had perplexed him before, he had always sought refuge in anger—in hatred of oppression. But now his emotions were no longer his own. The cleansing flood of anger would not come. And a dry, dead world of facts and forces confronted him.

With an effort he called to mind individual Commoners whom he had seen suffer, whom he had sympathized with, whom he had yearned to help. But now they seemed merely grotesque physiological machines—no possible concern of his. They did not move him.

Like a retreating soldier, then, he dashed from point of cover to point of cover, only to see each protection dissolve as he reached it.

His mother and father. They were heartless beasts who had betrayed him. It would be pleasant to watch them die.

Cousin Deth. He hated Cousin Deth desperately. But why? Cousin Deth was a sensible man, ever obedient to reality, ever solicitous about his own appetites. True, Cousin Deth did not like you. But no one liked you. There was no such thing as disinterested affection. Only hungry self-interest.

The New Witchcraft. Yes, it would be well to be in with them—if they won out. But they were warped with idealism. They wouldn't win out.

Sharlson Naurya. He loved her.

That love couldn't be destroyed. It was something he could cling to. Almost he could see her. He loved her. He wanted her. And if she could be persuaded, or forced, to enter the sisterhood, she'd become reconciled to it quickly enough. And then he'd have her.

The Hierarchy. There, at last, was real security. But for some reason he should consider it the wrong sort of security. What was the reason? If only he could remember!

The Hierarchy. Like some great golden sun it rose in his mind, dazzling him.

Then that golden light become a blinding, searing flame. There was an ear-splitting, deafening roar of sound. As if he had become the center of an explosion that shook the whole cosmos. An explosion that roared down every channel of sensation in his body, ripping his nerves with its awful intensity, destroying him.

Then, utter darkness of all senses.

Then, return from darkness.

He was still in the same room. Still in the same padded chair. Brother Dhomas was still staring at him.

Nothing had changed.

What had Brother Dhomas been going to do? Change his personality? But he hadn't! He was still Brother Jarles. The old fool had failed!

Of course he was Brother Jarles. Priest of the First Circle—but he wouldn't stay there long! Let's see, the Fourth Circle was the one to aim at—the circle of promotion. The Third and Fifth were largely blind alleys.

Of course he was Brother Jarles. Faithful servant of the Hierarchy, because any fool knew that was the best way to feather your own nest. Cousin Deth was his friend—that is, Cousin Deth was willing to favor him. And anyone whom Deth favored would go far.

Then came memory, like a blow. Incredulously, painfully, he remembered.

So Brother Dhomas hadn't really failed. His personality *had* been changed.

Unwillingly, with the acutest shame and embarrassment—the shame and embarrassment of a heartless man who prides himself on his heartlessness—he recalled that other, former Armon Jarles.

What an utter—what a contemptible, namby-pamby, sugary fool that other Armon Jarles had been!

XI.

Brother Chulian was afraid of the man on the bed. He watched him with an almost painful intensity, as if the man might vanish away or do something unpleasant to Chulian in the interval of a wink.

True, the man was presumably unconscious, had been since his capture. And so badly injured that he could not possibly move. So badly injured that recovery was not yet certain and an artificial heart was needed to supplement his own. Chulian could watch the blood coursing through the transparent tubes.

Hierarchic medical science was able to accelerate the process of healing to an amazing degree, but not by any stretch of sane possibility could that man move from his couch for many, many hours.

Still Chulian was afraid of him. For the man was a witch—or should one say warlock? At all events, a potent somebody in the Inner Witchcraft. Chulian had seen him captured, seen an angel pin down the flitting blur of darkness. Chulian had seen the witchmarks on his side—palely red circles as if made by the kiss of a puckered mouth, awakening shuddery recollections of Sharlson Naurya. Chulian had no doubts about the matter.

But if the man were a witch—and he was!—what powers might he not possess? Chulian had had too many recent experiences with those powers.

That abominable couch! He still couldn't sleep decently.

Those powers were outside the bounds of sane possibility.

Of course, the higher priests said they weren't. The majority of the higher priests maintained that those powers were just clever scientific trickery, engineered by an enemy of the Hierarchy. That point of view was being constantly dinned into the lesser priests these days. There were special meetings devoted to the subject. The higher priests promised that the Hierarchy would soon destroy the enemy. It only delayed to study the enemy and perfect preparations. Meanwhile the lesser priests should look on all phantasms, and on all seemingly supernatural manifestations and persecutions, with complete skepticism—and turn in detailed reports of them.

That advice wasn't very reassuring. How much more helpful, wistfully mused Chulian, if the Hierarchy could announce that the Great God, in his supernatural omnipotence, had decided to smite down the hosts of Sathanas. Only there wasn't any Great God—unfortunately. But how comforting it would be if there were!

Chulian watched the man on the bed. According to the higher priests he had been stripped of his powers along with his light-absorptive garment and his belt of equipment. Nevertheless, Chulian watched him—apprehensively.

A priest of the Third Circle came in, examined the man, took readings from indicators attached to the artificial extension of his circulatory system, and left without speaking to Chulian.

How mean of Cousin Deth to have given him this job! But of late, Brother Chulian had suffered constantly from Deth's petty, cruel maliciousness. Ever since that affair of the haunted house, the little deacon had become incredibly spiteful and malignant toward everyone. Apparently the fact he had been seen to run out of the place in terror ate at him like a canker. And because Brother Chulian had run out *after* him, as if having more courage, Brother Chulian had become the chief target of his dislike and spite.

He knew that Brother Chulian feared to go into the Commoners' Section after dark. Hence Brother Chulian must be sent out into those narrow streets as a kind of bait or decoy.

But what could Brother Chulian do? By gradual stages, quite against his will, he had become a member of the entourage of Cousin Deth. And behind Cousin Deth loomed the awesomely powerful archpriest Goniface. Having once been used by those men, he had to stand by them and look to them for security. After always having tried to avoid it, he had become enmeshed in Hierarchic politics.

For even Chulian recognized that there was cleavage in the ranks of the Hierarchy, and one that daily grew wider and more dangerous. There were signs of it everywhere. A cleavage between the Realists led by Goniface, on the one hand, and the Moderates on the other, who ever threatened to swing a section of the Realists to their support.

The Witchcraft was the chief point at issue. As far as Chulian could make out, the Moderates asserted that the manifestations of the Witchcraft were a largely aimless scientific hoaxing, which, given time, could be handled by ordinary procedures, without any serious disturbances of the routined existence of the Hierarchy. While the Realists supported the view that the Hierarchy faced a dangerous enemy and must be placed on what older civilizations called a war-time footing. According to rumors that filtered down, each party accused the other of mishandling the matter of Witchcraft for its own selfish advantage.

Goniface had become the man of the hour. More and more it was assumed that the final decision—whatever it was—would come from him. Many a priest was heard to mutter that he'd like to have Goniface made dictator, if only to put an end to the maddening uncertainty bred of internal dissensions.

Temperamentally Chulian was with the Moderates. He once had heard the archpriest Frejeris speak, and he had never forgotten the experience. A large handsome man, calm as a statue, but not at all cold, with a rich, soothing voice which irresistibly suggested that all difficulties, of any sort whatsoever, could be handled by oratory, conference and compromise. He had given Chulian a very comfortable and safe feeling.

Still, Chulian had to admit he didn't find the present policy of the Moderates very satisfying, with its minimizing of the danger represented by the Witchcraft. If they'd gone through what he had, they wouldn't minimize that danger!

For, most of all, Chulian wanted to be protected. He didn't very much care how.

In any case, he was now an agent of the Realists—a pawn of the Hierarchy-within-a-hierarchy headed by Goniface and Deth.

His eyes had strayed. There was a faint sound, as if someone were clearing his throat. Chulian looked back at the man on the bed.

The man on the bed had opened his eyes, and was watching him.

As consciousness ebbed back into the Black Man, his first thought was one that eddied up on the tide of consciousness from the depths of the subconscious—anxiety for Dickon. Without fresh blood, his little brother could survive for three days at the most, and the expenditure of muscular energy shortened that period drastically. Dickon needed him.

Then came sight of the red-filled tubes rising from his chest and quick realization of his helplessness. He must be somewhere in the Sanctuary and his body must have been smashed—crushed within the repulsor field—when the angel had hurtled him against the rooftop.

In that last instant he had ordered Dickon to take refuge in the drains and to attempt to follow him, guided by the short-range telepathic contact that linked the minds of witch and familiar and persisted to a slight degree even when one of the pair was unconscious.

Dickon was faithful. Dickon would have tried to obey that order.

Anxiously, he thought a message: "Are you there, Dickon?" Then he blanked his mind and waited.

Slowly, on the blank, a reply etched itself.

"Dickon is in the wind tubes. Dickon is very weak. Poor Dickon. But Dickon can see you."

Wind tubes? Ventilators! There must be an outlet in this room.

He thought: "Why can't you come to me?"

Hesitatingly—he could tell that his little brother's brain was dizzy with fatigue poisons—the reply came through.

"Dickon would like to come. He is in the mouth of a wind tube leading into your room. But there is always a priest in the room. It would be wrong for Dickon to take the slightest chance of a priest seeing him. You should know that, brother."

Of course! Were it not for the wonderful obedience of the familiars and their unswerving loyalty to the Witchcraft, they would long ago have ceased to be a mystery to the Hierarchy.

"Dickon has been waiting here for a whole day. Poor, poor Dickon. He had a hard time getting here. He lost contact with his brother's mind more than once. Dickon wants you to tell him what to do, brother."

The appeal, with its note of self-pity, was doubly pathetic because the Black Man knew that the familiar would willingly endure death by privation rather than risk the slightest violation of his strict, simple, almost inbred code of behavior.

By cautious experiment, the Black Man discovered that he could move his head, although the rest of his body was powerless.

He thought: "Where is the priest?"

"If you turn a little to the left, you will see him. He is not looking at Dickon's brother now."

Carefully, very carefully, and noiselessly, the Black Man rotated his head until he could see Brother Chulian. The fat priest seemed lost in some worried, mournful meditation.

He thought: "Have you enough energy to move swiftly for a little while, Dickon?"

"Dickon has still a few suppets of fresh blood in his sac. By sitting very quietly, Dickon has husbanded them."

"Good! This priest is an easy one to scare. Without showing yourself, scare him so that he runs out of the room. I will hold his attention."

"Afterward may Dickon come to his brother?"

"Yes."

*

The Black Man cleared his throat. He did not know yet if he could speak. One lung seemed wholly out of commission.

With a start, Brother Chulian looked up at him. Fear was already apparent in the priest's face. It only needed a little nourishment.

"I am a servant of Sathanas," said the Black Man. He spoke in a feeble, wheezy whisper.

Chulian peered at him apprehensively. "You are an enemy of the Great God," he finally replied, with a kind of uneasy diplomacy.

The Black Man twisted his numb lips into what he hoped was a wicked smile.

"Who fears the Great God?" he whispered. "The Great God is without authority. He was created by Sathanas in order that men might have hope and so struggle more amusingly against evil and terror and death."

That statement obviously confused Chulian—so thoroughly that, even if Dickon had moved less silently, the priest would hardly have noticed him glide along the base of the wall and slip under the stool on which he was sitting. But from the corner of his eye the Black Man noted the familiar—a slinking, reddish shadow.

"Nevertheless, you are a prisoner of the Hierarchy," Chulian finally asserted, unconsciously flicking his robe, as if something had lightly touched his thigh.

"Yes," whispered the Black Man ominously. "And I am wondering how you have dared to offer me indignity. Release me at once, or I will do you an injury."

Again Chulian flicked unconsciously at his robe, all his attention momentarily concentrated on the Black Man.

"You can't move from that bed," he said, with an uneasy insistence, as if he believed that saying so would make it doubly impossible. "You can't leave this room. And you can't possibly hurt me."

"So?" whispered the Black Man, smiling, for the first smile had seemed to bother Chulian. "Even now I stretch forth invisible hands toward you. Even now they are upon you."

With a squeal, Chulian shot up from the stool. Dickon had made the last touch a little more emphatic—more in the nature of a pinch.

Chulian rubbed his thigh, staring with a frightened suspiciousness first at the Black Man and then at the stool. Abruptly, as though he knew he would lose his nerve if he hesitated, he picked up the stool and turned it over.

But Dickon, clinging suctorially, moved always to the side of the stool away from Chulian, like an object palmed successively against the inside and outside of a conjurer's hand.

Reassured in one sense, Chulian replaced the stool and seated himself.

Instantly the pinch was repeated.

With a squeal that was now one of terror, Chulian sprang up, crazily waving his arms about to fend off the invisible hands. Darting one last terrified glance at the Black Man, he fled from the room.

The Black Man heard Dickon pattering toward the bed. Over the edge appeared a red-furred paw, whose suctorial palm was edged by five sharp-clawed fingers. Slowly and laboriously now, for the familiar had suddenly come to the end of its strength—the Black Man could sense dazed exhaustion in the quality of the vague telepathic impulses—the little creature pulled itself up into view.

Like a spider monkey it was, but with a much smaller torso and even skinnier. Downy, reddish fur covered what seemed the merest outline or sketch of an animal—a tracery of pipestem bones and ribbonlike muscles. The incarnation of fragile nimbleness, though at the moment sluggish with exhaustion. The head was more like a lemur's with large, peering eyes, now filmed and groggy.

A wraithlike, elfish thing.

But for the Black Man, the sight of it woke a pang of deep affection and kinship. He knew why its reddish fur was the same shade as his own hair, why its high-foreheaded, noseless face looked like a caricature or odd simplification of his own.

He knew it, loved it, as his brother. More than his brother. Flesh of his flesh.

He welcomed it as it crept feebly to his side and applied its strange mouth to his skin. And as he felt the suction and faint pricking, and knew it was drawing fresh blood from him and simultaneously discharging vitiated blood into his venous capillaries, he experienced a dreamy gratification and relief.

"Drink deep, little brother," he thought, and then his unquenchable humor flickered up. "This is on the Hierarchy, little brother. They must have transfused a lot of blood into me to maintain that artificial heart. So drink especially deep."

He felt suddenly very sleepy and weak. The perils of his situation seemed remote, and it was difficult to concentrate on them. If only he weren't helpless, he would have some chance of escaping. This wasn't the first time he had been in the Sanctuary, though always before he had been bound on diabolic business. He knew of a secret exit from the crypts, an exit of which the priests themselves were not aware. But until he could move, that information was useless to him.

Dickon would attend to things, he mused feebly. Dickon would take a message to the Witchcraft.

He lay there fighting the faintness which the discharge of deoxygenated blood from Dickon only aggravated.

As in a dream he sensed Dickon's thought: "Dickon grows strong now, brother. Dickon feels strong enough to take a message to the end of the world, if Dickon's brother desires him to."

Good Dickon.

There were hurrying footsteps outside. But before the Black Man could think the warning thought, Dickon sprang swiftly away and out of sight.

"Dickon returns to the wind tubes, brother. Think out the message you want Dickon to take. Dickon will listen for it."

Through a haze of weariness, the Black Man heard the sneering voice of Cousin Deth inquire, "And just where are the hands that clutched you so irreverently, your reverence? Would you take the trouble to show them to me? Oh, but I was forgetting—you said they were invisible. Are they still pinching you, your reverence? I am all solicitude."

Then Brother Chulian's shrill reply. "I tell you, he touched me! He looked at me, he spoke to me, and then invisibly touched me!"

"How rude of him!" observed the sarcastic voice. "I fear I shall have to give the job of watching him to a less sensitive person. Oh, I believe he touched you invisibly all right. But it wasn't your body he touched, your reverence. He touched your mind—with suggestions, hypnotism. The Witches are very clever with such things."

The voice grew louder, until the Black Man, in his semiconscious daze, realized that Cousin Deth must be looking down at him.

"Yes, they are clever with such things. But I wonder how much his cleverness will count when he is well enough to go before Brother Dhomas."

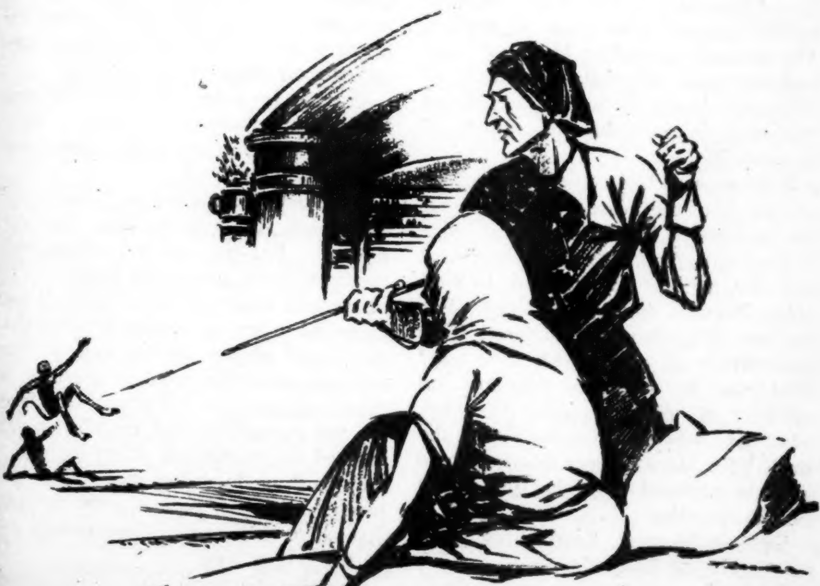
XII.

It had been market day in Megatheopolis, and usually on market day the Great Square did not empty until almost curfew. But now the Commoners were packing up and hurrying home although the sun had not yet set. Business had gone half-heartedly. Thought of the coming night had taken the zest out of trading.

There had been an invisible merchant moving among them, who gave away his wares free. His name was Terror.

Who dared go home by twilight and risk meeting one of those great, gray, red-eyed beasts who last night had prowled and snuffed through all the alleyways? Or chance having your way home cut off by such a creeping darkness as last night had driven a patrol of deacons to seek refuge in the dwelling of a Commoner? Umder Chohn the Smith, at whose home it had happened, said the deacons had been more frightened than himself.

Everyone had some horror or wonder to tell, and whispers had passed more swiftly than trade goods. Several swore they had seen angels—"great winged ones with glowing faces"—indicating that the Great God was at last taking some interest in the trials and tribulations of his creatures. But the reassurance that this gave was more than counterbalanced by a set of ugly and disturbing rumors which seemed to indicate that the priests themselves were



not immune to the general terror.

These latter rumors penetrated everywhere, though whispered in very low tones and with sidewise glances to make sure no priest or deacon was in earshot. How a priest had fled screaming from a service in one of the lesser chapels because something invisible had clutched his throat as he preached. How a group of Commoners, returning at night from their work in the fields, had been deserted by the priest who was supposed to escort them and protect them from the forces of evil. He had seen something and run away, leaving them to get home as best they could. How a child had died of the Choking Sickness last night, because no Third Circle priest would come from the Sanctuary.

There were other indications that the Hierarchy itself was afraid. For two days now bands of rural priests had been trickling into Megatheopolis. Some said they were come for a religious festival. But others maintained in guarded whispers that they were seeking the protection afforded by the Grand Sanctuary. This was confirmed by the farmers who came to market. The farmers asserted—a little more outspokenly than townsfolk—that many of the rural sanctuaries were deserted and that work in the fields was coming to a standstill.

Traders who had come by muleback or cart from the nearer cities said that the minions of Sathanas were at work in those cities, too. They were surprised and not a little disconcerted to find Megatheopolis similarly besieged. For was not Megatheopolis the Great City, from which all others took their cue? Was not its sanctuary foremost on earth? If Megatheopolis trembled, what hope was there for the rest of the world? No, some hideous ultimate doom must be at hand, involving priest and Commoner alike.

Sathanas laughed. Earth shook. And the Great God took no heed.

So it came that an argument circulated with the tales of priestly cowardice. An argument it was hard to believe any Commoner had invented, but that each Commoner chewed over frowningly as its implications penetrated his sluggish brain.

It ran this way: "Why don't the priests protect us? We have confessed our sins twice over. We have done everything they told us. We have reformed. We have been virtuous. Then why don't they protect from further terror and temptation? They tell us it's a test, but surely the test has lasted long enough. They've always *said* they could smite down Sathanas whenever they wanted to. Then why don't they? And if the Hierarchy is stronger than Sathanas, as they've always told us, then why should even one single priest be afraid?"

So Sharlson Naurya, slipping into the Great Square, sensed surliness as well as fear in the Commoners leaving or preparing to leave it. Wise in their ways, she was quick to note their mixed emotions. To her it was apparent in the readiness with which they quarreled over right of way and other trifles, exchanged accusations of pilfering, and cuffed their children for loitering.

For her purposes, the bickering confusion was an advantage, since it occupied the attention of the few priests and deacons on hand.

She knew she was taking chances and disobeying the instructions of Asmodeus. But she was too screamingly weary of being cooped up longer. The mysterious leader of the Witchcraft had conveyed to her the solemn promise that she would play a leading role in certain measures that would eventually be taken against the archpriest Goniface. On the strength of that promise, which assured the satisfaction of her life's purpose to drag down her murderous half brother, she had been content to obey Asmodeus and avoid risking herself until the proper time.

But, the disappearance of the Black Man and Jarles had upset that. Drick said that apparently the Black Man had been killed or captured by the Hierarchy, though it was strange that no other captures had been reported. Perhaps Asmodeus had sent him on some secret mission, though no word to that effect had come from Asmodeus and there was no way to question him.

Meanwhile, Drick grew short-tempered, grim and taunt with fatigue, for the Black Man's work was more than he could carry, yet there was no one else to carry it. He had replied curtly to Naurya's questions about Jarles. To him, Jarles was of no consequence. Presumably he had been scared off or captured by the Hierarchy. In any case it would be futile and dangerous to attempt to keep the rendezvous the Black Man had made with him.

Naurya thought differently. She knew Jarles' stubbornness and the strength of his will. If he had decided to join the Witchcraft—as the Black Man insisted he had—then nothing short of death or capture would prevent him from keeping that rendezvous. He would come back again and again. He was that kind. Naurya knew.

But Drick had said they could not concern themselves with trifles, now that everyone was needed for the great work. Naurya must stop bothering him.

So, since nothing but a promise held her, Naurya had slipped away. Garbed as a Commoner, with shawl drawn around her cheeks, she threaded through the sullen crowd in the Great Square, like a young mother searching for lost children.

And she felt rather like one. True, she might love one of the two men. But, to her mind, sobered by early responsibility and toil, hardened by the motive of revenge yet attuned by bitter experience to the sufferings of the Commoners, they seemed more like her children. The Black Man the slightly spoiled darling—terribly clever and good-natured, but terribly impudent and mischievous and harum-scarum, too. Jarles the serious one, beset by moral problems, full of high purposes, very idealistic and well-intentioned, but faultfinding and inflexible, so that he was always getting into scrapes which he foresaw but was too stubborn to avoid.

There was a Commoner about Jarles' build slouching at the next corner. Instinctively she hurried her pace. He had a stubbly growth of beard, and wore a hood—perhaps to conceal a recent priestly tonsure?

She came closer. It looked like Jarles. It *was* Jarles. The emotion she felt was mixed with a certain tart self-satisfaction. So Drick had said it would be futile to keep the rendezvous? For that she'd take Jarles direct to the Coven meeting tonight. Drick would find out soon enough that she had gained a very able convert for the Witchcraft.

Now she could see that he had recognized her. At closer view, it was apparent that his expression was subtly altered. Almost, she sensed deception—except that she knew Jarles was utterly incapable of masking his intentions. His original renouncing of the Witchcraft, when he desperately needed shelter and help, had proved that once and for all. But it could not be denied that he looked sharper and more awakened. Undoubtedly the rough time he'd been having had opened his eyes to certain realities his idealism had been blind to. And that was all to the good. With the barest nod in his direction, she turned into the side street. After a moment he followed her.

The elation Jarles felt was not unmixed with apprehension. He had hardly hoped to contact the Witchcraft so smoothly and so soon, but this was just the beginning of it. Ahead lay many perils—threats to his bodily welfare. And recently Jarles had come to have a great respect for that bag of flesh and bones which contained his ego. Once let that bag be seriously ruptured and you could whistle through all eternity for another. Only you couldn't whistle.

Why he had ever before taken such desperate risks—and not for personal gain!—was mixed up with the greater mystery of why he had ever been such an idealistic weakling as he remembered. He disliked thinking about it. It was all too cheap and puerile.

Of course, to achieve personal gain and ego-satisfaction, it was necessary to run risks. You never got anything for nothing. Obviously, Goniface wouldn't make him a Fourth Circle priest unless there was something in it for Goniface. So it was necessary that Jarles embark on the ticklish job of betraying the Witchcraft.

Goniface! There was a man for you! Jarles never remembered envying anyone so acutely or admiring anyone so utterly, though grudgingly. Not even Cousin Deth. For the archpriest had the breadth of vision and capacity for power—and enjoyment of it—that the deacon lacked.

Elevation to the Fourth Circle—and all that went with it, and even a little more besides—was obviously worth taking risks. Anything was better than to grub along with the timid little minds down in the first two circles. But it was only common sense to minimize risks and stretch margins of safety as wide as possible.

So it was with alert senses and active mind, ready for emergencies, that Jarles followed Sharlson Naurya into the Commoners' Section. With a certain pleasure he noted the rich tones the sunset glow elicited from the crude masonry. Life had opened up for him in these last days and become infinitely more satisfying now that he had awakened to a true realization of it. Tasting, sniffing, touching—and all the other sensations—brought a keener delight. For now he clearly understood that he was nothing but an independent ego, free for a term to savor the pleasures of the world, and impose his will upon it. Once you understood that, everything was clear as day and every moment was precious.

Foggy idealism had blinded that other Jarles to the possibilities of enjoyment right under his nose. But that other Jarles could no longer bother him now—except when he slept. Then, indeed, he sometimes dreamed. And his dreams were troubled ones, heavy with guilt, from which he awoke sweating and trembling. After one of those dreams he would feel he must keep up a constant mental pressure against his subconscious mind, or else that other Jarles would somehow leap back into control. But Brother Dhomas had pronounced his new personality—his real personality—to be unusually well stabilized. And dreams were, after all, only dreams.

Now that they had left the Great Square behind, he caught up with Sharlson Naurya and walked beside her. He judged it wise to say, in a low voice, "I'm with you people to the finish now. I thought it all through at Mother Jujy's."

For answer there came the warm, friendly pressure of her hand, assuring him that she understood him and warning him against further speech.

The touch of her hand brought again to mind the special problem that had been nagging Jarles ever since he spoke with Goniface and particularly since it had turned out, very much to his surprise, that Sharlson Naurya was the one sent by the Witchcraft to contact him.

Goniface had given very explicit directions about Sharlson Naurya, both to Cousin Deth and to himself. If she chanced to be caught in the coming raid, she must instantly be killed.

Now Jarles had a great regard for Sharlson Naurya, and her presence beside him intensified it. He certainly did not want to see her destroyed. Of course, if it came to an issue, he would have to sacrifice her—even destroy her himself if it were absolutely unavoidable. But if, without drawing too much suspicion to himself, he could manage to spirit her away, that would obviously be the ideal solution.

After all, why was Goniface so interested in her? She must have something important on the archpriest. She must know a secret or two that would be very helpful in speeding up Jarles' promotion, if judiciously employed. So he had a double reason for preserving her life, if opportunity offered.

Sunset had paled to twilight. His guide turned suddenly into a tiny shrine where Commoners might come to pray. In the gloom he could make out the image of the Great God, the altar, and the few small benches. The place was empty. Sharlson Naurya advanced to the wall at one side of the altar and felt along the ornate plastic molding.

So that was how they reached their hide-out? Through a street-side shrine! They were clever, all right, as Goniface had kept drumming into him. Very clever.

But, after all, only clever fools. For they were obviously not motivated so much by self-interest as by misty idealism. And the only stable movement, or government, was one based strictly on self-interest. That was a truism back in the Dawn Civilization, though not always recognized.

A heavy panel slid aside. She stepped through. He paused for a moment in the doorway, so that the bulb of dark-radioactives strapped to his left forearm would leave a heavier spoor at this point to guide Cousin Deth. Impatiently, she motioned him in. He obeyed.

The panel closed. They were in the interior twilight of a narrow passageway, lit by infrequent, tiny lamps. Again she felt along the molding—plain here—beside the doorway. Evidently reactivating an alarm system that had been turned off while they entered. As she started down the passageway he took a chance, felt for the button, found it, depressed it, then quickly followed her.

Cousin Deth had boasted of being able to slip around any warning system ever invented. But it wouldn't hurt to make things easier for him, and it might help to shorten a certain period of time that could be very unpleasant for Jarles—that between the Witchcraft's realization of betrayal and the arrival of Cousin Deth's forces.

At the end of the corridor they descended a flight of stairs. Another corridor. More stairs. Jarles' senses were strainingly alert. This might be the route along which the Black Man had rushed him when he was the stupid Jarles. It had seemed more complicated then. But he had been blindfolded.

"These passages date back to the Golden Age," Naurya explained to him. She stopped.

"The entrance to the Coven Chamber is just ahead, beyond a zigzag," she said. "I'm going to take you in and immediately propose you for membership. They must be meeting now. Here"—her hand touched the wall—"is one of the extra entrances. We use them only in emergencies."

Her finger activated a button and a panel slid open. There was a friendly, helpful smile on her face, but it changed as she looked at him, as if she saw something there that troubled her.

"Of course, I shouldn't tell you these things now," she went on slowly, a little nervously—almost uneasily. "But you'll know them soon enough—"

Jarles' new personality thought and acted swiftly. This set-up was ideal, and she seemed to be growing suspicious. Unnoticeably adjusting the controls on the wrath ray strapped to his forearm to paralyzer quality, he directed its now-invisible, faintly hissing beam at her waist. She stiffened. There was a convulsive retraction of the diaphragm. Her mouth opened spasmodically, but she made no sound.

Catching her arm, he let her fall gently into the side passageway she had just uncovered. Then, counting seconds, he coolly played the ray against her skull. When he was satisfied that she would remain unconscious for a sufficient period, he shut the panel, and proceeded toward the Coven Chamber.

Purple-tinged darkness, and a voice speaking masterfully through it. Silhouetted against the lesser darkness of the far wall, a crowded ring of human forms, listening to the voice. A phosphorescent throne against the far wall, and in it a dead-black manlike shape, and the voice coming from the shape.

Vividly the remembrance came to Jarles of the first time he had been in this chamber. So vividly that for a moment the two experiences were mixed, although then he had been a different person. Memory could bridge any gap.

How could the Black Man be here? He was a prisoner in the Sanctuary. No, it must be another person clothed in a similar light-absorbent field. The voice was not the Black Man's.

Silently he donned the ultraviolet transformer goggles, which Cousin Deth had provided for him at his own suggestion. It was as if a sickly yellow light had suddenly illuminated the whole room. Instantly mysteriousness vanished from the scene. With two exceptions it became very ordinary. Just a long, low room and a group of people listening absorbedly to a speaker who sat in an unadorned and unimpressive throne. Jarles experienced a pleasant feeling of superiority.

The two exceptions were the speaker and a tall something beside the throne.

The speaker was still only a manlike shape, not one whit less black than before. The field he wore drank *all* radiations.

The tall something so puzzled Jarles and distracted his attention that he still had not time to catch the drift of what the speaker was saying. Certainly the object had not been in the room on that other occasion. It was very like an angel, of about the same height and general conformation. But the broad, dusky, lifeless face was incredibly ugly, with wicked horns sprouting from the forehead, and the forearms were reptilian and clawed. A demon monolith, it stood there rigidly, twice as tall as a man and a little taller than the room, so that its horns extended upward into a large circular recess or orifice in the ceiling.

Some piece of ritual sculpture, Jarles decided. These people were very imaginative, yes, and very clever—perhaps. But they were children in true craft, giants in carelessness. How else could they permit him to penetrate so easily their secret councils!

Oddly the speaker was now expressing much the same thought. Jarles listened to the masterful voice.

"Thus far you have only played at being witches. It has been a good game and a hard game and dangerous, but, to most of you, only a game. Most of you were drawn into the Witchcraft by a rebellious and mischievous desire to exercise secret power in a world where the Hierarchy has a monopoly of power. Each of you had some special motivation, too—resentment, revenge, boredom, negativistic perverseness, consciousness of inferiority, and a thousand more. But your basic motivation was little different from that of a child who dreams of being invisible, so he can perform wonders and astound adults.

"I and my co-workers recognized this when we devised the Witchcraft. We knew that a great cause and a worthy purpose would be insufficient to attract a following. It was necessary to provide inducements of a more interesting, flashy, and essentially petty sort. We knew that you would obey our instructions so long as they were sufficiently amusing, mischievous, and satisfying to your desire to exercise secret power. And when, as often happened, you embarked on private pranks, we did not interfere. We made the frightening of priests a game rather than a task."

The voice paused. One of the circle

of listeners eagerly interjected a question.

"What you say is true. But what would you have us do now, O Asmodeus?"

Jarles' heart pounded. Asmodeus! He had heard that name given to the leader of the Witchcraft. The coming captures would be of vast importance. Elevation to the Fourth Circle was no longer sufficient compensation. The Seventh Circle, at the least! Lucky he had Sharlson Naurya to use against Goniface, if the archpriest balked. Spiriting her to a safe place of confinement would be easy.

"Now," continued the masterful voice, "the game is over. Or, rather, it enters a more serious stage. Thus far you have been amazingly successful despite frequent foolhardiness and carelessness—for we laid your plans well and we knew that even the most careless person will expend infinite pains on the details of a hoax or practical joke. Most important, the Hierarchy has been slow to act. A conservative organization, it has never since its establishment faced any opposition worth the name. And it is at present troubled by internal dissensions. So, partly from conservativism, partly from cunning, partly as a compromise, it has adopted a waiting policy.

"But do not underestimate the Hierarchy! It is awakening—has almost awakened—to its danger. More and more, its vast spy system is being devoted to the work of tracking us down. In a thousand sanctuaries, research priests of the Fifth Circle are close to discovering and duplicating the scientific secrets of the Witchcraft. And there are signs that the internal dissension in the Hierarchy will soon be healed—by drastic surgery.

"Do not underestimate the Hierarchy! It is so vast an organization that it is almost of necessity slow to action. And so powerful that it can afford some delay. It is no empty priestly boast, when they threaten to call down help from heaven!"

Soon now, thought Jarles, Cousin Deth must strike. According to his calculations, the deacon must already be past the panel in the shrine. And still no alarm. That was good. Yet he felt a sudden pang of fear. Not fear for his own safety—he felt that all right, constantly, and it kept him painfully alert. But that fear was clear and sharp. The other was vague, formless. In vain he tried to grasp its nature.

"In warfare, time is all-essential," came the voice from the throne. It was a voice that gave the impression of wickedly bright eyes, not without humor and compassion. "How much more, then, is time essential in the psychological warfare—the war of nerves—we are waging! Fear is our only weapon, and it has one great limitation—it swiftly loses its effectiveness. We cannot hope to maintain for any length of time the fear we have aroused in the priesthood. By a carefully plotted rising tide of terror we have badly shaken the lesser priesthood and planted the seeds of supernatural panic in the higher circles. But if we pause now, our advantage evaporates. We must create a stampede. The tide of terror must continue to mount—and more swiftly than the now-aroused Hierarchy can devise countermeasures. Such a process cannot go on indefinitely. Our estimates indicate that in a very few days the crisis will be here, when we seize the sanctuaries and take over those powers and responsibilities which for most of you have only been a grandiose dream, although you have received some realistic training in them.

"It is partly because of the coming crisis that I have summoned you leaders together and taken the unprecedented step of appearing before you in person."

Better and better, thought Jarles. All their leaders bagged at once. And Asmodeus! But the murky, undefinable fear still oppressed him. If only Deth would strike!

"I have come to discuss with you the plans for our final operations. Instructions conveyed on reading tapes are no longer sufficient. But I will handle those matters with you individually, after this meeting.

"For the present, I must first rebuke you for your general laxity and carelessness. You are overconfident! My messengers report that it is *too* easy for them to penetrate your secret offices and leave my instructions there. You have neglected to take the precautions I advised in my last two memoranda.

"Secondly, I must warn you of a vast responsibility that may fall to your lot. It concerns myself and my co-workers. We, your leaders, are in a peculiarly vulnerable position. It may very well happen that, before the crisis comes, we will be found out and destroyed. In that case, your chief agents of the Witchcraft in the key city of Megatheopolis will have to take over."

Jarles clenched his fists in nervous impatience. What was delaying Deth? His murky fear had now become something strange and unpleasant. He had the feeling that something was going to happen to thwart him, and that he could easily prevent it—if only he knew what it was. It made his head feel heavy and hot, like a fever.

"Plans for such an eventuality have long been in existence. But they were intrusted to one of you who has since disappeared—presumably dead or the Hierarchy's prisoner, though I have reason to doubt the latter. Therefore, it will be necessary to make new arrangements."

This reference to the Black Man ought to have interested Jarles, but he had almost ceased to listen to Asmodeus, the strange fear was affecting him so. It was making his throat dry and numb. When he raised his hand to his lips they were no longer sensitive to touch.

And yet, if he only knew what it was that was coming, he could prevent it. Maddening. If it got any worse, he would have to break the globe and summon Deth, though he was not supposed to do that unless he was apprehended.

"—critical moment approaches." He was only vaguely aware of Asmodeus' words. "—every move you make from now on . . . freighted with significance—Not only your own safety . . . fate of the world— This city . . . crucial—Future of mankind—"

At that instant a painfully convulsive spasm seized Jarles' vocal organs, and, to his intensest horror and dismay, because it was something entirely independent of his volition and beyond his control, he heard himself cry out, "You are betrayed! This is the Hierarchy's trap! Escape while you can!"

Then control over his muscles came back to him. With a snarl of rage and shame—for the moment he was beside himself with hatred of that other Jarles who had spoken—he ripped the globe from his left arm and hurled it against the wall, where it broke with a faint, tinkly *plop,* erupting dark radioactives which would jolt Deth's instruments if he were anywhere near.

And Deth must have been very near, for before the semicircle of witches and warlocks could more than rise to their feet—while they still stood there stunned—deacons bearing wrath rods and other weapons poured into the room from behind Jarles.

Out from the semicircle of witches and warlocks, a shadowy scurrying went along the floor, like rats running for their holes. Before Jarles could get his own wrath ray into action, they had vanished.

Asmodeus was the only human being who had reacted swiftly to the warning. He sprang for the demonlike sculpture beside the throne. The thick violet gout of a wrath rod cut down a witch and impinged upon him. For a moment his blackness glowed eerily, as the absorbent field strained to drink the power. But before the field collapsed, he was behind the sculpture, which seemed resistant to the ray.

Jarles circled forward, hoping to get a shot at him from the side. They had Asmodeus! He was too greatly outnumbered. He had managed to reach a point of cover, but he couldn't hold out long.

Not behind the sculpture, though. In it!

A solid blow—fringe of a repulsor field—sent Jarles reeling. The demon figure moved, lifted, and, the focus of a dozen tongues of violet incandescence, shot upward through the orifice of the ceiling.

Sprawled on the floor, Jarles realized bitterly that his first impression had been right. The thing was like an angel—mobile. And the shaft into which it had vanished must lead to the surface.

Deth had said there would be angels patrolling overhead. They were the last, slim hope of catching Asmodeus.

XIII.

All Earth's Commoners and half Earth's priesthood in the grip of supernatural terror. Geometrical increase in the daily quota of fear-psychoses. Panic spreading through the rural sanctuaries, becoming a rout. Two distant cities stampeded by a wave of terror that caught up priests and Commoners alike. Disturbing reports from Luciferopolis, and their transmission beam going dead before the facts could be ascertained. Fear, confusion and suspicion in the Grand Sanctuary of Megatheopolis. Dangerous mutterings from the Commoners' Section.

And, in the pearly gray chamber of the Apex Council, a tension to which each passing second added its increment of strain, building toward some inevitable eruption.

But to the archpriest Goniface all these symptoms were satisfying rather than otherwise. How, in the name of reason, could he expect to gain supreme and absolute power, unless the others became so bunglingly frightened that they pushed it into his hands to save themselves? This kind of crisis was what he'd always hoped for. His emotions were those of a king who is about to be crowned in the midst of a great war and on the eve of a decisive battle.

For the first time in many days he could relax. His plans for this stage of the struggle were all laid. He could sit back and watch them unfold.

There were precious few loose threads in his overall plans, and they could be picked up later. Geryl—Sharlson Naurya—was still alive and at liberty. And Asmodeus had escaped. That was unfortunate. Still, many important witches and warlocks had been captured. Cousin Deth and Jarles had done very well. It would be a good thing to have a few more men like Jarles, whom you could trust absolutely because their personalities had been made to order. Perhaps Brother Dhomas would manage something with that fellow who had been captured at the same time as Jarles.

One other loose thread—a very shadowy one. That spot of blood on his couch, which he had noticed after awaking from troubled sleep some nights ago. The doctors had discovered a small incision in his back. Apparently a tiny portion of tissue had been excised. It was hard to see how the wound could have been caused accidentally. One of the doctors had hinted nervously at the possibility of poison. Nothing had come of it. Still, the incident stuck in his mind.

But those were only faint ripples on the surface of his confidence. In completest calm he watched Brother Frejeris rise to accuse him.

The Apex Council was tense—a semicircle of watchful masks. Goniface did not waste time studying them. He knew what a safe majority of them were thinking. A score of secret conferences with individual archpriests had accomplished his purposes. He knew how a safe majority of them would vote when the crucial issues came up. And that was all that mattered.

Brother Frejeris addressed him directly. The leader of the Moderates appeared as calm as rock. Perhaps, mused Goniface, Frejeris thinks that this is his day, too.

Frejeris' voice had a silky note. "Do I rightly understand your purpose in having your servant Cousin Deth bring those instruments here?"

With a wave of his hand, he indicated an arrangement of gleaming apparatus before the Council table. A chair, with attachments for confining the sitter, was a chief feature. Engaged in testing the apparatus was a group of Fourth Circle technicians, under the direction of Cousin Deth, who carried himself with an air of smirking assurance, although his sallow face was impassive.

Goniface nodded.

"Torture!" Frejeris enunciated the word with indignation. "Have we become barbarians, as threatened in the Golden Age, that we stoop to such brutality?"

The idea of brutality actually shocks him, thought Goniface amusedly. I wonder what name he has for the toil we exact of the Commoners, and the penances we impose on them? But since those necessary everyday brutalities have the sanction of tradition, they do not disturb his conservative mind.

Frejeris continued, "Our Brother Goniface all of a sudden informs us that his agents have apprehended a group of individuals who, he tells us, are dangerous to the Hierarchy. His agents have done this without the knowledge or consent of the Apex Council, in direct violation of all procedures. Now he tells us that these private captives of his are members of the New Witchcraft. On top of all that, disregarding the scientific methods we have at hand for extracting truth, he proposes that they be questioned under physical torture and —again secretly—makes arrangements for it. Why, I ask the Council, this reversion to barbarism?"

Goniface could have given him what he considered a very satisfactory answer, had it been necessary. The strength of the Witchcraft lay in its avoidance of force and its sole dependence on supernatural terror. By supernatural terror it had already achieved a greater weakening and disorganization of the Hierarchy than an army could have done. If an enemy should attack the Hierarchy in open warfare, the priesthood would immediately be welded together into a unit for self-defense. But supernatural terror had just the opposite result. It provided nothing to strike back at. It confused, inhibited, and—above all—made its victims doubt the efficacy of physical force as a defense.

By using physical force—torture—on the captured witches, Goniface hoped to provoke the Witchcraft to retaliate in kind. If that happened and the struggle became open warfare, there could be no doubt of its conclusion.

But in all events, even if the Witchcraft did not strike back, it would be helpful to priestly morale to use physical force on their enemies. It would make them think of this conflict as a war. Even the most credulous priest, one who had come to believe firmly in the existence of Sathanas, would at least learn that the agents of Sathanas were as human as himself, and as susceptible to pain and death.

Historic priesthoods beset by witchcraft had followed the same procedure, with effective results.

But no need to say that to the Council now. A safe majority of them had been privately acquainted with his arguments.

"I will tell you why our Brother Goniface has done all these things," continued Frejeris after a dramatic pause. His magnificent voice deepened in timbre and grew more vibrant. "And in so doing I will reveal him to you as a ruthless upstart, seeking to seize absolute power! I will show you that he has organized a hierarchy within the Hierarchy, a vast clique of deacons and priests loyal only to himself. I will prove to you that he is taking advantage of this matter of the Witchcraft and exaggerating the danger it represents, in order to foment a world-wide crisis and seize power in defiance of precedent, with the excuse that he does it to save the Hierarchy!"

Frejeris understands what is happening, thought Goniface, but he completely misjudges the attitude of the Apex Council. They are, most of them, frightened. They *want* someone to take supreme authority. They *want* someone to take over the responsibilities they are unequal to. In peaceful times they are all for tradition and red tape, and the sentiments of a Moderate like Frejeris are very pleasing to them. But once they realize that a great and immediate danger threatens them personally, they want their safety guaranteed and they don't care how. At such times an able, ambitious and unfrightened man can write his own ticket.

With a sweeping glance up and down and table, Frejeris prepared to launch into a detailed accusation.

He never began it. The archpriest Jomald, bellwether of the Realists, rose and said simply, as if it were a very ordinary matter, "The archpriest Frejeris has placed the Hierarchy in grave danger by obstructing and delaying action against the Witchcraft. If left free to his own devices, he will continue to do so. His motives are highly suspect. I ask for his immediate excommunication for the space of a year. I further ask that the matter be brought at once to a vote."

Frejeris glared at him with a cold and supercilious disdain, as if outraged merely by the unprecedented discourtesy of the interruption. Apparently the meaning of Brother Jomald's words had not yet registered on his brain.

"I second that!" lean Brother Sercival snapped unexpectedly, from where he sat beside Goniface.

Even the old Fanatic plays along with us, thought Goniface.

And still Frejeris stood there uncomprehending, as if waiting for the rude interruptions to come to an end, so he could get on with his oration. He was a magnificently stately man.

His own Moderates understood what was happening before he did. Ominously for him, they looked more frightened than indignant.

"Are there any objections to bringing the matter to a vote?" asked Jomald. His voice was like the rap of a gavel.

Very slowly, very hesitatingly, one of the Moderates started to rise to his feet, glancing uneasily up and down the table. What he saw there caused him to change his mind. He sank back, avoiding Frejeris' eyes.

Only then did Frejeris understand. To his credit, it did not break his calm. His large, handsome face lost nothing of its statuesque quality. But that only made his reaction more obvious: This was unheard of! Too crude and ruthless to be possible! They couldn't do it to him. Not to Frejeris, who had always advocated moderation and compromise, who had always stuck to tradition. Not to the man who had tried to please everyone.

One after another, clenched fists were laid on the gleaming table. Frejeris glanced with a cold haughtiness at the archpriests who thus voted against him, but more with the air of a man who rebukes discourtesy than that of a priest facing excommunication.

Goniface's safe majority became a landslide. At the end, not one hand had been laid palm downward to indicate a negative vote, and only two Moderates had abstained—and they looked acutely uncomfortable, as though they regretted not being sufficiently perfidious to vote openly against their leader.

"Execute the sentence!" cried Jomald to the group of Fourth Circle technicians.

Several archpriests betrayed surprise, only now realizing how closely everything had been planned. It was just dawning on them that all the lesser priests in the chamber were Goniface's men.

But still Frejeris preserved his calm. The Moderates to either side of him shrank away, but he did not flinch. Like a marble statue he stood there.

And like a marble statue he was toppled down. The technicians had long been ready. Invisible emanations played upon him, establishing blocks in his sensory nerves. The optical nerves were the first to be affected. Gropingly, he raised his hands to his blinded eyes, but before they could reach them, his tactual sense was gone. Equilibrium went with the rest. He swayed forward and fell heavily across the table—a table he could no longer feel.

More helpless than a baby he sprawled there, an insensate ruin, excommunicated from the universe as well as from the Hierarchy, shut off from all sensory contact, doomed for a year to the private hell of his own thoughts—a year that would be an eternity, for there would be in it no way to measure time.

And even as lesser priests were stepping forward to remove the fallen leader, Brother Jomald spoke again.

"I further ask that dictatorial power, power to use all our resources against the common enemy, be vested in the archpriest Goniface, that he be declared World Hierarch, until the Witchcraft is no longer a menace to us. During this period the Apex Council will function as his chief advisory board."

That motion, too, was passed without a single dissenting vote. Even old Sercival, who might have been expected to cling grimly to independence, went with the rest. Goniface, who had not spoken a word all this time, was almost startled. This was easier than he had expected.

Their relief at handing over their responsibilities to him was obvious. They were more frightened than he had realized. It suddenly occurred to him that a good many of them must already be suffering from the ghostly persecutions of the Witchcraft and be too proud—or weak-kneed—to admit it.

But any such thoughts were swallowed up in the great tide of his satisfaction. It was as if his vision of the far-flung empire of the Hierarchy, that vision which guided him and was with him almost constantly, had suddenly become an integral part of him. He seemed to experience a vast extension of personality, as if the Hierarchy had become a part of him and he had become the Hierarchy, in the sense that it was now his brain alone which ruled that complex and more than globe-girdling social organism.

Only one qualm—such centralization of power meant increased vulnerability. But it was necessary, both for his own ambition and for the safety of the Hierarchy. And even if he should die, there were still a good half-dozen Realist archpriests with sufficient character to take his place.

"Bring in our prisoners," he commanded. "Let the questioning begin."

This brought an unanticipated objection. But since it was now only from a member of an advisory board and not from an independent archpriest, it no longer mattered much.

The objection came from Sercival. His parchment face was the incarnation of zealous hatred.

"I beg you, your supreme eminence, let us have no traffic of any sort with the agents of Sathanas! If you certify that they are witches, let them instantly be slain! They are too foul a blemish on creation to let exist."

Goniface was annoyed. Never any telling what the old dodderer would say or do next! First—unexpected support. Now—an idiotic suggestion stemming from superstitious and unrealistic hatred. Not that it mattered. The sole Fanatic on the Council had never had any real power, anyway. But since, being a true Fanatic, he believed or professed to believe in the real existence of the Great God and Sathanas, his attitudes were not helpful to the morale of archpriests already touched by supernatural fear. Something would have to be done about the Fanatics pretty soon, Goniface decided.

"I voted to give you supreme power," continued Sercival, "because I consider you a strong man, willing and able to fight ruthlessly against the Lord of Evil. No quarter to his witches, I say!"

Goniface noted that several archpriests actually looked disturbed, as though they were unpleasantly close to believing in the real existence of Sathanas themselves. They must be very frightened not to see the ridiculousness of the Fanatic's position. Certainly the old fool must be muzzled. But not so soon after he had voted to excommunicate Frejeris and elevate Goniface to the dictatorship.

"I have heard you," Goniface told Sercival coolly. "You will not find me sparing the enemy. But it is necessary to question them."

Reluctantly Sercival sat down. "I still say they should be slain," he muttered doggedly.

But attention shifted away from him to the captured witches being escorted into the Chamber under a heavy guard of deacons. With feigned casualness the archpriests were making the most of their first opportunity to study the enemy face to face.

The first impression was reassuring. The prisoners were all dressed alike in coarse-woven, scanty tunics of identical cut and hue, bare-armed and bare-legged. And they actually seemed dirty! Moreover, the fact that they did not struggle at all or resist in any way the ungentle and unnecessary shoving and jerking to which the deacons subjected them, had the appearance of servility. There could be nothing to fear from such a ragamuffin crew as these! Why, they looked like a road gang—except that most of them were women. A few of the women seemed moderately pretty—might even be rather fetching if decently groomed and clothed in the appealing garb of the sisterhood. But as they were now, these supposedly potent enemies resembled nothing so much as a crew of the humblest menials—which was exactly the impression that Goniface had intended to create when he had ordered that they be so clothed and so conducted.

The second impression was not so reassuring. The individual faces were obviously more sensitive and intelligent than those of the average run of Commoners. What had passed at first glance for oafishness became on closer inspection a brooding thoughtfulness. And there was a subtle air of solidarity, of mutual loyalty, about them, so that they seemed to stand firmly together as a group—and this impression was only heightened by their similar garb. Likewise, it became apparent that they did not so much submit frightenedly to the rough handling they were getting, as ignore it because their minds were concontrated on other matters.

That impression of brooding thoughtfulness was the most intangibly disturbing. One got the feeling that they were communing with powers outside the Council Chamber, so that, though confined physically, they were in a sense free—that they represented something more than they appeared to be—that there was something very big standing behind them.

On the whole, however, it was the first impression that predominated. The other was only a lurking afterthought.

With a toss of his dwarfishly large head, Cousin Deth signed to a Second Circle clerk to begin the proceedings. From the very instant that Goniface had been granted dictatorial powers, the little deacon had dropped the mask from his features, so that all his emotions registered there in naked ugliness. His bold glances toward the Apex Council said more plainly than words, "I am the second man in the Hierarchy now." And there was something grotesquely yet starkly indecent about the way he would look first at an individual witch and then at the clamp-furnished chair by which he stood.

From the luminous face of a reading-tape projector, the clerk recited to the prisoners a brief indictment that was also a conviction.

"You have been apprehended while conspiring against the Hierarchy, under the guise and pretense of Witchcraft. If any one of you will stand forward now and make a full confession of guilt, holding back nothing, that one will be spared the torture."

There was no movement from the witches, but watchful tension was apparent in their very motionlessness and silence. Abruptly one of the women began to tremble and shake spasmodically, her head thrown sharply back, her eyes closed. Swiftly her movements became more violent. Her neck muscles stood out sharply, and her knees were bent as if she were bracing herself with a great effort. It was as if something invisible were shaking her. Suddenly she fell down and frothed at the mouth like an epileptic.

"Lord, protect us!" she screamed, writhing convulsively on the floor. "Sathanas, aid thy servants!"

A vast wolfish shape materialized from the misty gray of the walls at the other end of the Chamber. Its eyes were like two sooty hearths filled with dying embers. Toward the Council table it stalked, big as a house, the very incarnation of skulking, slavering destruction.

The archpriests had risen. Several of them could not conceal their emotions. The lesser priests also shrank back, although they had been warned of the possibility of such occurrences.

"Dissolve it!" Goniface called sharply to Cousin Deth. Then he rose, too. "The thing is only a telesolidographic projection—as all of you must realize!" The last phrase was directed bitingly at his fellow archpriests. What ninnies some of them had become, to quail at an obvious imposture like that! Almost he wished Frejeris were still among them. The pompous Moderate at least knew how to put up a front.

Partially reassured, the archpriests noted that there was indeed a certain transparency to the advancing monster, so you could dimly see through it to the wall beyond; and it was a ghostly slaver that dripped in ropes from the gigantic jaws. Moreover, the great paws with their foot-long nails seemed sometimes to step a little above the floor and sometimes a little below.

Then Deth's technicians got the range of it and it began swiftly to melt away. Whole sections of the body disappeared instantaneously, leaving only a few remnants which their instruments had not caught at the first focusing. True, there was something hellishly suggestive, almost worse than the original, about those remnants—an ear tuft here, a hind paw there, a patch of dirty fur coarser than grass, and the smoky hellhole of an eye. But in the main the results were very helpful to priestly morale.

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"There was, of course, no need to dissolve it," said Goniface coldly. "I merely wished to demonstrate conclusively its solidographic nature. Our Fourth Circle brethren were able to dissipate it with the recently invented polyfrequency neutralizer. The thing was purely photonic in nature and yielded quickly to an application of the principle of interference. All phantasms employed by the so-called New Witchcraft are of a similar sort. To put a complete stop to them, it will only be necessary to discover and destroy the hidden projectors—merely a matter of time, even without the information that will soon be at our disposal." He glanced significantly at the group of witches. "We could with the greatest ease insulate this chamber—or the whole Sanctuary—from such projections. But there is no need. Our research scientists are sure that it is impossible to transmit physically injurious frequencies and intensities. Should we insulate the Sanctuary, it would give the false impression that we are afraid—that there is something to fear. Hence we must disregard any and all solidographic projections that are sent against us, as we disregard our own shadows!" His next word were very definite. "I command every priest and deacon here to take no notice whatever of any projections directed into this chamber—purely for their nuisance value—in the course of our proceedings."

And he sat down—instantly to become aware of a slight sultriness and of the fact that everything in the Chamber had turned bright-red and become exceedingly foggy and indistinct.

Disobeying the command they had just been given, most of the archpriests sprang up and crowded to either end of the table, away from Goniface. For where their World Hierarch had been sitting, there now sat a huge red devil, whose shaggy red legs seemed poked through the table itself, and whose great horned head swung from side to side, grinning down at them with fiendish mirth. Coiled up monkeylike over his shoulder was a thick red tail ending in a vicious barb.

In the interior of the redness, the figure of Goniface could be made out hazily, like an insect embedded in cloudy amber.

He stood up and for a moment his head almost emerged from the redness. Then the devil stood up, too.

There was a commotion among the witches. They had dropped to their knees and many of them were calling out adoringly, "Master! Master!"

Old Sercival raised a shaky hand. His glittering eyes rolled confusedly in their wrinkled sockets. He seemed not so much frightened as indignant.

"What does this mean?" he cried.

"Have we voted for Sathanas himself?"

Deth's technicians also disobeyed the command. Swinging their projector around, they stripped the solidographic projection from Goniface. First his head emerged, then the rest of his body. He looked very grim.

But even as that happened, there came a startled cry from the deacons. An inky cloud of darkness had suddenly engulfed the kneeling witches, billowing ever wider, threatening to fill the whole chamber. From the cloud emerged deacon guards, hands stretched ahead of them, hastily groping their way.

"Wrath rods!" called Goniface, even as the black cloud lapped dangerously close to the technicians and their instruments. "Swing them into the darkness at waist level. If it doesn't dissipate, keep going all the way through. No neutralizer can counteract *their* energy!"

Beams of violet flame spattered against the gray walls of the Chamber, swinging in toward the darkness. The cloud seemed to make a last despairing effort, thrusting out an inky pseudopod toward the door of the chamber, as if to make a way of escape for the witches. But the wrath rays touched it, cut into it. Abruptly the cloud vanished and the wrath rays halted.

Not too bad an end to it, thought Goniface. At least we've showed they'll stop their tricks and yield to a physical force threatening their own persons. But I should have foreseen that it would be impractical to attempt to disregard the solidographic projections. Their nuisance value is too artful, especially when they mingle the ludicrous with the terrifying. If the hidden projectors are not discovered soon, it may be wise to insulate the Chamber. For the present—

"If any further solidographic projections are introduced into the Chamber, witches will be slain!" he announced harshly. "For every such projection, a witch!"

"Are you not going to slay them all, immediately?" demanded old Sercival. "I only now heard you order that they be slain with rods of wrath, as I advised from the first."

The idiot! A stop would certainly have to be put to his senile babbling.

"It was merely a device on my part, your reverence," Goniface answered curtly. "These are worldly matters which it is doubtless difficult for your saintly nature to comprehend!"

At this rebuke, Sercival subsided, though muttering and shaking his head. It was apparent that several other archpriests would have been relieved to see the Fanatic's advice followed and this trying matter of the prisoners brought to a swift and decisive end.

"Begin the questioning!" ordered Goniface.

Two deacons singled out one of the witches and led her toward the chair by which Cousin Deth was standing. She was a fair young woman, but very frailly built for a Commoner. Her skin had a waxy quality and her features were peaked. There was a certain air of weakness about her, or at least of extreme delicacy. She had been selected for that reason, as the one easiest to break down. If the first witch should endure the torture, the rest would be strengthened to bear it themselves. But if the first should yield quickly, their courage would be undermined. Not that there was much question of any of them enduring it.

She went quietly until they reached the chair. Then she struggled frenziedly like a wild animal, biting and scratching. But as soon as she had been secured, this spasm left her. She grew instantly very quiet.

The clerk read out: "Mewdon Chemmy—for that, although you deny it, is the name by which you have been identified—it is my duty to advise you to answer all questions truthfully and satisfactorily. Otherwise you will put us to the unpleasant necessity of influencing you to make an answer. Past cultures have used all manner of devices to induce pain—the rack, the wheel, the boot, the dental drill and a host of others. But the Hierarchy is merciful and is not pleased by mutilation. Therefore its priests have devised a means of producing all the same sensations of those varied tortures by direct stimulation of the nerves that transmit the sensation of pain. Thus the same results are achieved without any injury to the bodily organism, save it come through shock or convulsion. There is this further advantage—the torture need not be interrupted for fear that injury to the tissues will result in death."

The clerk sat down.

Leisurely Cousin Deth walked forward a few paces, then suddenly turned on the witch.

"What is your name?" he asked.

There was a pause. Then, faintly, the voice of the witch, "The servants of Sathanas are nameless."

Cousin Deth laughed. It was unpleasant to think that he had been repressing such laughter for many years. He said, "You have been identified as Mewdon Chemmy, Commoner of the Eleventh Ward, trained in the coloring of pottery, wife of Mewdon Rijard. Do you deny this?"

No answer.

"Very well, Mewdon Chemmy. You are accused of conspiring to overthrow the Hierarchy."

"Your clerk said more than that." The voice was faint, but very clear. "He said that I—all of us—already stood convicted."

"True, Mewdon Chemmy. But if your answers are satisfactory, it will save you pain. Precisely in what ways have you conspired against the Hierarchy?"

"I have followed the instructions of Sathanas."

Deth laughed. "What instructions?"

"To make myself a vehicle for his supernatural volitions. To practice the lore taught me. To curse and cast spells. To vex and torment those whom Sathanas points out to me."

For a third time Cousin Deth made the sound that passed with him for laughter. "It may be that you are accustomed to use a nonsensical jargon to describe your activities. Understand, then, that it does not interest us. We want only material facts. What scientific procedure have you been taught?"

"I know nothing of such procedures. Being omnipotent, Sathanas has no need of them."

Deth looked up from her to his chief technician. "Are you ready?" he asked.

The priest nodded. A thick metallic canopy had been moved forward behind the chair. It fitted around the witch's head like a cowl. Curving flanges followed the lines of her body. It resembled a topless sarcophogus made for a seated figure.

Deth looked again at the witch. "Thus far, in view of your tenderness and sex, we have been lenient with you, Mewdon Chemmy. That leniency will be cut short if you persist in childish evasions. Understand once and for all, we will waste no further time listening to meaningless babbling of Sathanas and other supernatural unrealities. I hardly need remind you that you are not dealing with credulous Commoners."

There was a stir at the Council Table. Such blunt, unsubtle talk was highly irregular. Old Sercival was heard to mutter indignantly. Several archpriests glanced questioningly at Goniface, but failed to catch his eye.

"However, Mewdon Chemmy, you still have a chance," Deth continued. "If you will give up the material facts, and if they are subsequently verified, we will deal mercifully with you."

The witch's face, shadowed by the metal hood, looked little as a child's, pale as a ghost's. But for all that there was a delicate sting in her almost-whispered answer. The archpriests leaned forward to catch it.

"How can you deal mercifully with me? You have admitted that the Hierarchy does not believe in the supernatural—has no faith in the Great God. Could you loose me to tell that to Commoners? Could you take the slightest risk of any of us revealing your shams?"

Deth triumphantly whipped his reply at her. "Now we are getting somewhere! At last you admit that all is scientific mummery?"

The silence in the Council Chamber was such that her whisper was plainly audible.

"Not so. For more than a century Sathanas has let you believe that, in order that your downfall may be the more complete and your torment the more tantalizing. Sathanas is! He rules supreme in the hell you call the cosmos!"

Again there was a stir at the Council Table. Again Goniface ignored it. He was following the verbal duel with closest attention. Inwardly he smiled in frank appreciation of the woman's last words. They were well chosen, could hardly have been devised on the spur of the moment. It was illuminating to know that the Witchcraft had planned in detail even for this eventuality.

But there was a way to disrupt any plans that depended on human beings for their execution. He signed to Deth.

"Mewdon Chemmy, we want facts!" cried the deacon harshly. "First, who is your real leader?"

"Sathanas."

"Evasive babble! Let the pain enter the fingers of the left hand."

With the words came a surging increase in the tension pervading the gray chamber. Rods of wrath were lifted against the other witches, some of whom had surged forward ominously. But most of the witches, eyes closed, seemed to be repeating inaudible prayers to their dark divinity.

Then, from the metal shroud, came the faint sound of air sucked suddenly between teeth and tongue.

But Goniface, World Hierarch, did not hear it, although he was listening intently. For, at the same instant, he felt that the fingers of his left hand, hanging at his side, had been dipped in molten metal.

With a sudden and supreme effort of will he checked the impulse to jerk it upward, writhe and cry out. With a continuation of the effort that was only less than the first effort itself, he glanced up and down the table. If he had made a betraying movement, none of the archpriests had noticed it.

"Mewdon Chemmy, who is your real leader?"

"Sathanas. Sathanas." Rapid, breathy whispers.

Goniface let his glance slip downward. There was nothing unnatural about his hand, except the white knuckles and taut tendons. Slowly he moved it until it rested on his knee. The searing pain was unabated.

"Let the pain creep into the wrist. Who, leaving aside the one you call Sathanas, is your leader?"

"He is— Give me strength, Sathanas!" A whimpering gasp. "He is Asmodeus!"

To Goniface, it was as if he had drawn on a red-hot gauntlet. It was hard to force thought. Could there be some unimaginable leak in the instrument? But the pain-stimulative waves were short-range emanations. By the same token, how could they be transmitted from outside?

"Who is Asmodeus?"

"Sathanas, aid me! He is King of the Demons."

"Into the arm! Who is Asmodeus?"

"King . . . of the Demons."

"We know that Asmodeus is a man. What is his real name?"

"King—" A choked scream. "May Sathanas burn you forever! I don't know. I don't know."

"Then Asmodeus is a man?"

"Yes. No. I don't know. I don't know! Sathanas, burn them as they burn your servant!"

Goniface felt beads of sweat pricking his forehead, as the invisible incandescence lapped higher, and higher still. Was his face as gray, he wondered, as that shadowed by the metal hood? The other archpriests must not be allowed to notice! They must not be given the slightest hint of what was happening to him. They were too shaky, too frightened, too near to panic, as they had proven incontrovertibly by accepting him as World Hierarch. He could order Deth to stop the torture. But if he showed the slightest personal fear, if he betrayed the slightest vulnerability to the supernatural—and this impossible pain was so suggestive of the supernatural!—the effect on the Apex Council might be disastrous.

He must think. Think!

"Mewdon Chemmy, who is Asmodeus? What is his name?"

"Don't know . . . don't know!"

"Have you ever seen him?"

"Yes. No! Yes! Mewdon Chemmy, Sathanas! Your faithful servant."

"What did he look like?"

"I don't know. A blackness! A blackness . . . and a voice."

The beads of sweat were trickling down Goniface's forehead in nervous little rushes. He dared not order Deth to stop. Not at this critical moment. Thus far the Witchcraft had maintained its pretense at supernaturalism. The woman's testimony was having a bad effect on the Apex Council. But only a little more pressure and she would break, and the whole supernatural structure come crashing down in materialistic bricks. Only a little more pressure. If she could bear it—

And this impossible pain must have a source. Think!

"Very well, Mewdon Chemmy. We will leave Asmodeus for the moment. Where in Megatheopolis are the headquarters of the Witchcraft?"

"I don't— Where you captured us."

"That was only a meeting place. You know I don't mean that. Where are the real headquarters?"

"I don't— There are none."

"A lie! You know something, for you twice started to conceal it. Where are the real headquarters? Where is the scientific armament kept?"

"In the— There is no such armament. Sathanas does not need—"

"Into the shoulder!"

Agony groping upward, scalding. Think! Think! A commotion of some sort at the far end of the chamber. The high doors opening. And from the kneeling witches, a low, murmuring supplication, rhythmic, intense, like the beat of a muffled drum. "Sathanas, aid us. Sathanas, aid us."

A little more pressure— No, he must stop the torture—hoping that his own torment would also stop! It had been an insane dream ever to think of bearing it, of suffering as the witches suffered. For he would have to bear it in silence, concealing all reactions, and that was impossible. The Council would surely notice, and that would be worse than stopping. But how to stop it? Think! Think how!

"Mewdon Chemmy, where are the headquarters? You are in the Great Square. You are going to the headquarters. You are walking toward a street. You are entering it. What street is it?"

"Of the Wea— No! No!" A whimpering scream.

"You are walking along the Street of the Weavers, Mewdon Chemmy. You smell wool. You hear the sound of the shuttle. You are walking. Now you are no longer in the Street of the Weavers. You have turned. Where?"

"No! No! It's Mewdon Chemmy calling you, Sathanas!"

A group of priests were hurrying from the great door toward the Council Table, their scarlet robes flapping. Slowly, effortfully, Goniface rose, his left arm rigid at his side, the left shoulder stooped, as if he lifted a great weight.

"From the shoulder then—"

"Stop the questioning!" ordered Goniface loudly, and with such a strained, mechanical enunciation that all stared at him.

Deth waited a moment, then shrugged his shoulders and motioned to the technicians.

Relief came to Goniface with dizzying suddenness. An invisible torrent of ice water took his breath away. The whole chamber seemed to rock, and he gripped the table to keep from staggering.

"What is the matter?" he asked the newcomers, the laboriousness fading from his enunciation as he spoke. "Only the most urgent reason could justify your interruption."

"The Commoners are marching on the Sanctuary!" cried one. "They have left their work. All attempts to halt them have failed. Two deacons opened up with wrath rods in the Street of the Smithies, but were overwhelmed and torn to pieces. A priest of the First Circle who ordered them back was captured and mistreated. He is still in their power. Already they fill the Great Square. They demand to know why we do not smite down Sathanas and the reign of terror. They cry, 'What about the Witchcraft? What about the Witchcraft?' They shout down any priest who seeks to reason with them."

An alarmed murmuring flurried along the Council Table. Goniface heard an archpriest mutter, "Warblasts! Sweep the Square!" He recognized one of the newcomers as being from Web Center and bid him speak.

"News of similar rioting is pouring in from half Earth's cities. It looks like prearrangement. A mob broke into the Sanctuary of Neodolos. They were driven out, leaving many dead behind. From everywhere come pleas for instructions."

Goniface spoke rapidly. "Unship the parasympathetics in the Cathedral and play them on the Square. By amplifier, proclaim tomorrow a holiday and announce that a Grand Revival will be held. There will be solemn supplications to the Great God, miracles will occur, and the Great God will vouchsafe a sure and infallible sign of the coming victory over Sathanas."

To the priest from Web Center: "Relay the same instructions to all sanctuaries. Tell them to use all available parasympathetics, including the hand models in the confessional booths. If the crowds do not disperse after the announcement, deluge them with music. In no event must force be employed! If any sanctuary is mobbed, I will count it as a black mark against the incumbent priesthood. Instruct Neodolos, on pain of general excommunication, to hold solemn funeral for all slain Commoners and convey home their bodies with the greatest pomp. Contact all sanctuaries, even those not asking instructions, and ascertain conditions. Inform them that detailed instructions for conducting the Grand Revival will be on their way by nightfall, Megatheopolis time. In two hours return me here a complete survey of the general situation."

To a clerk: "Fetch me the records of all previous Grand Revivals, including moving solidographs of the last two."

To another clerk: "Summon the Sixth Circle Faculty of Social Control. The Apex Council desires their advice. Send to the crypts and ask Brother Dhomas to attend me at his earliest convenience."

To a third: "Inform the Fifth Circle Faculty of Physicists that a telesolidograph shield must be set up around the Great Square. All technical resources are placed at their command. They may requisition any and all apparatus. But the shield must be complete by dawn tomorrow."

To a fourth: "Make further effort to contact the ship bringing reinforcements from Luciferopolis. If successful, inform it to make full speed."

To Cousin Deth: "Return our prisoners to their cells. Confine them individually. Each must be watched continuously by at least two guards, and the guards watched in turn. Be prepared for the most fantastic attempts at rescue you can conceive. I hold you solely responsible.

"There will be a private session of the Apex Council. Clear the Chamber!"

He sat down.

"Can you still intend not to slay the witches, your supreme eminence?" There was a fierce, though quavering note in the harsh voice of old Sercival. "The testimony of that wicked woman proved conclusively that they are agents of Sathanas. It is dangerous and foolhardy—and an offense against the Great God—to let them live longer."

"It is essential that we obtain information from them," Goniface answered sharply. "I only interrupted the questioning because there are weightier matters at hand. We must plan the Grand Revival."

Sercival shook his head. A mad—or prophetic—glint seemed to enter his hawklike eyes. "It were better that we fall on our knees and ask pardon of the Great God for our long years of unbelief, and beg his mercy. Else I see darkness loom sudden before us and doom for all!"

There was grim finality in Goniface's reply. "Your reverence's mind is tired and confused. But I shall excommunicate the next priest who talks of failure or implies that there is any supernatural reality in Sathanas."

From the witches departing under their doubled guards came a monotonous, murmurous chanting, faint yet seeming to fill the whole chamber.

"Thanks be to Sathanas. Thanks be to Sathanas. Thanks be to Sathanas."

XIV.

As Jarles activated the door of his private apartment in the crypts, he frowned at the Fourth Circle emblazonment mistily reflected in its gleaming surface. Goniface had rewarded him insufficiently, considering the importance of the service he had rendered. Still, Asmodeus had escaped. As always, it caused him a bitter pang to remember that Asmodeus would not have escaped had not that other, puerile Jarles managed to seize control of his body and bleat out a warning. But he should consider himself lucky that his hideous slip had not been brought to light—and that he had been able further to strengthen the trust Goniface and Deth put in him by foiling an attempt at escape by the captured witches while they were being conveyed to the Sanctuary.

Having entered the apartment, his first concern was to reactivate the lock. It irked him somewhat that he could not display his new regalia—insufficient reward though it was—to a larger priestly audience, and that Cousin Deth had been given sole credit, in public, for capturing the witches. However, as Goniface had told him, it was undoubtedly best that he work in secret for the present. Save for Goniface's private following, no priest had any inkling of his return to the Hierarchy, let alone the awakening of his true personality. His elevation to the Fourth Circle had come solely from Goniface, not from the Apex Council. But since Goniface had been voted World Hierarch this morning, it amounted to the same thing. And Jarles chose to think it a guarantee of future rewards rather than a reward in itself.

In any case he had more than adequate compensations for this temporary obscurity. Almost overnight he had become one of Deth's chief colleagues and had won the complete trust of Goniface. Evidently the World Hierarch recognized in Jarles an unblinkered realism and unfettered self-interest akin to his own, and this pleased Jarles mightily. Doubtless Goniface had often wished for such a helper. It gave Jarles acute pleasure to think of Goniface, Deth and himself as a kind of small and very select fraternity of individuals completely liberated from sentimentality—of necessity mutually watchful, but putting more trust in each other's steady selfishness than in an idealist's generosity.

As a result, he enjoyed considerable freedom of action—and that had its special advantages.

He passed through a second room, as sumptuously furnished as the first, and entered a third, reactivating all locks behind him.

On a couch, pale face upturned, eyes closed, hands folded as in death, lay Sharlson Naurya.

He looked at her for a while. Then, with a mild, stimulative beam of antiparalysis quality he dispelled her unconsciousness.

She stirred. She turned her head. Her eyes opened. He read in them a hate that he interpreted half as a compliment.

She sensed the interpretation. She said, slowly and distinctly, "You incredible, disgusting egotist."

He smiled. "Not egotist. Realist."

"Realist!" Contempt gave strength to her utterance. "You're no more a Realist now than when you were a blind and stubborn Idealist. You're a fiction villain! I suppose that every blundering Idealist who hasn't been brought face to face with the hard facts of life carries, at the back of his mind, a sneaking suspicion that villainy is a very dashing and romantic thing. Sathanas help me that I ever live to see that conception of villainy become concrete actuality! When your mind turned turtle, or when they turned it for you—Oh, but I'm forgetting that you call it an 'awakening,' aren't I? Well, when that happened, your new personality was necessarily fabricated out of all your fragmentary romantic notions of villainy—unlimited ambition and conceit, absolute lack of emotion, and all the rest of the supervillain idealogy!"

She paused, fascinated against her will by his reactions. Her eyes opened wider, in incredulous loathing. "You like me to talk about you that way, don't you?"

He nodded. "Certainly. Because I'm a Realist. Experience has thought me how close detestation is to admiration, how close hate is to love."

"Another cheap romantic fallacy!" Anger made her tremble. "Realist! Can't you understand that you're behaving like a book, that you're inflated to bursting with delusions of grandeur? Don't you realize that all your childish plots are going to come down crashing about your head? Have you no conception of the risks you are running in this game you're trying to play, according to some romantic code of villainy, with men like Goniface? Realist! Look at your insane recklessness in bringing me here. What will happen to you when Goniface finds out?"

He smiled. "It was necessary to bring you here. There was no one to whom I could intrust you. And who would think of looking for you here? You know—the obscurity of the obvious. Moreover, Goniface trusts me. He doesn't dream that, while serving him, I plot against him."

She glared at him. "What if I should reveal myself?"

"You won't be able to. And even if you could, you wouldn't. Because you'd know it meant instant death for you, by order of the World Hierarch. That's the beauty of the arrangement."

He was pleased with the way things were going. At last she was talking to him; hitherto she had refused to. And that meant she was beginning to feel the need of propping up her childish and delusive hatred of him.

Yet, despite his pleasure, he was not altogether sure that she was weakening. Once or twice he had gotten the impression that she was talking to him in order to distract his attention. Why, he could hardly guess. But he kept on the alert.

"You mentioned Goniface," he said. "Why don't you tell me why he wants you killed? You must know something about him that would endanger his position if revealed. Why not tell me what it is? Then we'll eventually be able to drag him down altogether, after the present emergency is past. That would please you, wouldn't it?"

Deliberately she looked away from him.

"Come now, you're being very unrealistic," he continued, persuasively. "Don't you realize what I'm offering you? In any case, you should be a little grateful to me for saving you from so many unpleasantnesses. This morning your former associates were put to the torture."

That brought back her eyes.

He nodded confirmingly. "Oh, yes, and you may expect a bit of a change in your friend the Black Man if you ever happen to see him again. Today he was well enough to be taken to Brother Dhomas."

"You mean they intend to—" She tried to push herself up, but the aftereffects of the paralysis were too weakening.

"To awaken him to a state of realistic self-interest? Yes. So you see, Naurya, the Witchcraft is done for. Just a matter of time. And that means there's no longer any point in your remaining loyal to it. Surely that must be obvious to you."

For a long time she just looked at him. Then she asked him, in a strange voice, "Do you ever dream now?"

For once he did not smile. "No," he said flatly.

Slowly she shook her head, keeping her eyes fixed on him. "Oh, yes, you do, and it must be hell for you. I *hope* it's hell for you."

"Dreams mean nothing," he said coldly. "They are unreal."

"They're as real as anything else," she shot back at him. "And they merely mean conscience."

For a fraction of a second her gaze slipped past him. Suspiciously he turned. Nothing there but the locked door.

"Conscience is just social pressure," he told her, tense without quite knowing why. "The impulse to submerge your ego in that of the herd, and do what other people want you to because you're afraid of their censure. Realistic self-interest frees a person from the childish restrictions of conscience."

"Are you sure of that, Jarles? What about your dreams? What about the hell of your dreams? Conscience may be partly what you say it is, but it's more than that. It's hearkening to the wisest thoughts that have occurred to minds of the human race. Conscience may sometimes be distorted, but still it's a link between the self-centered ego and whatever's good and decent in the universe."

"Do you seek to persuade me to that shadowy unreality called virtue? Next you'll be talking of ideals!" Her anger rather pleased him, though he still felt oddly uneasy.

"Certainly I'll talk about ideals! For it's ideals that torment you when you dream. I saw you grow up, Jarles. I saw your ideals grow. Maybe they grew too fast, so that they lost balance and were easy to topple down, like a tree that grows too fast for its roots. But though they've been toppled down and broken up and shoved down into the depths of your subconscious mind, they're still there, Jarles—a private hell in your own mind, and just a door between it and your consciousness. And at night the door opens."

In the nick of time, an involuntary sideways wavering of her vision warned him. He dodged and struck out as the little furred horror struck suddenly at him—from nowhere, it seemed. As a result, the razor claws slashed his cheek instead of the throat beneath the ear. His flailing arm chanced to catch the thing and hurl it across the room. In the moment before it recovered itself, his wrath ray blasted out and almost cut it in two. There was a great splatter of blood, much more than could have been expected from such a creature.

He darted over to it, then recoiled from the incredibly frail monster whose big eyes, glazed by death, goggled up at him. For a moment he had the incredible conviction that he had somehow killed Sharlson Naurya.

He looked back at her. She had struggled up into a sitting position, but there further strength failed her. She was not crying, but her shoulders were racked by an emotion that seemed mingled of unappeasable hate and a dry, anguished grief.

"This creature meant that much to you?" he asked sharply. He glanced quickly back at it. A look of sudden, almost incredulous understanding tightened his features. "I think I've got it," he said slowly, more to himself than to her. "Although I'm no biologist, I think I've realized the secret of the familiars. And that will be very welcome news to the World Hierarch."

"You've killed Puss," he heard her say. The words were like little stones.

"Your sister, in a sense, I believe?" He smiled. "Well, she tried to kill me, with your connivance, so that's all square. Don't think I harbor resentment. This discovery will put a new emblazonment on my robe—and another shovel of earth from the grave we're digging the Witchcraft."

He looked at her, still smiling, stanching with a cloth his bloody cheek. "I rather like your nerve and your ruthlessness," he said. "We'll get along very well together after you've been fixed. Oh, haven't I mentioned that? Well, after the present emergency is passed and we've attended to Goniface one way or another, I'll have Brother Dhomas turn your mind right side up."

She made one more attempt to rise, and failed. She could only say, each word seeming to choke her, "You dirty, little storybook villain."

He nodded, smiling. "That's right," he said, and turned the paralysis beam on her.

XV.

Dickon had been gone four days. Was there any point in hoping he would return? But was there point in any other hope. Wearily, again and again, the Black Man blanked his mind for the message that never came. It was laborious work, for the recent session with Brother Dhomas had made his mind a quasichaos, like a planet driven by catastrophic volcanic activity, so that new continents and archipelagoes rise everywhere from the steamy sea, and all the coastlines are changed.

In a way, his session in the crypts had been a wonderful game while it lasted. Or, rather, a hunt, with Brother Dhomas the hunter and his personality the quarry, ever fleeing, ever doubling back, ever seeking cover and then abandoning it, never safe a moment, using every stratagem and deception that desperation suggests to the hard-pressed animal. The most thrilling hunt in the world—the pursuit of naked self-identity through the wilderness of the mind. And he had won out—his still-weakened physical condition had necessitated a return to his cell to recuperate, before Brother Dhomas had achieved his purpose.

But with the temporary ending of the hunt, all exhilaration had departed. Exhaustion had come, and with it acute misery and despair. Sleep was impossible, even if he had sought it. His mind was too abnormally wrought up and uneasy. For in the course of the hunt, the mental wilderness had changed, so that he almost lost his way. By emotional and neuronic wrenchings, by wide-scale disarrangements of the barriers between the conscious and the subconscious, Brother Dhomas had so distorted his mental environment that he no longer recognized whole regions of it. His mental environment, the most intimate part of him, had become something subtly alien. He was frightened of his own thoughts. He did not know what lurking monster would next heave up from the unquiet shadows.

And soon the hunt would begin again, with the hounds more eager and the hunter fortified by knowledge gained in the first pursuit and himself with determination weakened and resources diminished. For now Brother Dhomas was familiar with his set of mental tricks for eluding pursuit. He would have to devise a second set. Such a process could not go on indefinitely.

And if he somehow managed to win out a second time, the hunt would begin again.

Brother Dhomas' last words stuck with him: "You defend yourself well. Your mind is of exceedingly strong fiber. You will never grant me a partial victory, and that pleases me. When you yield, it will be altogether. As a result, your new personality will have a very firm foundation."

And yield he sometime would. No getting around it. Sometime he would forget and, without realizing it, begin to think the cheap, selfish, vindictive, hopeless thoughts they wanted him to.

And then—well, he had seen what had happened to Jarles. The renegade priest now seemed to be in high favor with the Hierarchy and to enjoy the confidence of Cousin Deth, for he had twice come to visit the Black Man in his cell. Apparently his motive in doing this was a kind of jealousy and a desire to assert superiority, for he had spoken smirkingly of a superior wisdom he had attained—"realistic self-interest," he called it—and had dropped maddening hints of recent crushing victories over the Witchcraft. Hints which festered.

The Black Man knew that the crisis in the great struggle must be at hand. If the Hierarchy survived much longer, it would be because the Witchcraft had failed—and partly because of his own foolhardiness. He tried not to think

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of the critical battles he was helping to lose because he could not take part in them. But he failed, and his mental turmoil was thereby increased.

What if Asmodeus himself were captured or dead? That was one of the possibilities which constantly haunted the Black Man. If that had happened, it was his duty to take over the command.

Maddening, also, to know that, if only he could get out of this prison, he could easily escape from the crypts. The hidden entry was very near the prison. But so long as this cell confined him, that information was valueless. Maddening to have to recognize that Dickon was his only hope. If only the witch-familiar and familiar-familiar telepathy weren't such a short-range, uncertain thing!

Doggedly, each time with greater difficulty, he blanked his mind for the questing thoughts of the familiar. No question here of Dickon reaching him through the ventilators. This was no hospital chamber but a metallic cell under the constant surveillance of two guards. Nothing but telepathy could get through, and the Black Man wondered if even telepathy could. Those delicate vibrations were tricky things, capable of traveling moderate distances under the right conditions but easily stopped by a few feet of certain materials. Moreover, Dickon did not know the location of this new cell. He would have to cast around for it at random and in great peril, and the length of the search he could make was narrowly limited by his powers of endurance.

Once again he blanked his mind. Once again no answer came. Once again his own fantastic, half-alien thoughts scribbled themselves on the blank.

Through the narrow, circular darkness Dickon quested, guided only by the vivid tactual sense that edged his suctorial paws when his claws were retracted—save where infrequent openings gave him glimpses of rooms which he already knew did not contain his brother since he would have received telepathic forewarning.

Dickon was not worried. Such emotions were much too hazy for his clear-cut, highly simplified mind. Even his frequent self-pity was matter-of-fact and specific. But he knew that his fresh blood was running low, and waste blood piling up, even under the slight demands of his ribbonlike muscles. He had gorged himself at the Breeding Place, but it wouldn't last forever. Eventually he would have to stop moving.

But before that happened he would be able to explore a few more branches of the huge inside-out tree which was Dickon's mental diagram of the ventilator system. Dickon's sense of spacial orientation was wonderfully accurate, partly depending on the magnetic field of the Earth.

It was very windy in the tunnels. He had to buck a constant gale. If he ever let go on all four suctorial paws at once, he would be whisked like a bit of waste for an indeterminate distance before he managed to bring himself to a stop with his claws—if he could. For Dickon, as he often told himself, was a mere diagram or outline drawing of a man. His bones were lighter than a monkey's, his body had not a genuine fat cell in it, and his internal organs were reduced to a single compartmentalized cavity which served both as blood pump and blood-storage chamber. All substances for the production or conditioning of which other organs were necessary, he sucked in along with the blood he drew from his symbiotic partner through his wizened little mouth, which was lined with almost microscopic cutters instead of teeth. He neither digested nor eliminated. He did not breathe, although he could make feeble sounds and even talk by drawing air into his mouth cavity and expelling it between vibratory cords. His bones were hollow, since he needed no marrow for producing blood corpuscles. He was without ductless glands and had no sex. His fine, short fur was just the thing to insulate him against loss of body heat, thereby greatly increasing the efficiency with which his wiry muscles transformed blood sugar into mechanical energy.

Just a skeleton, muscles, tendons, skin, fur, heart, simplified circulation system, nervous system, twitching ears, peering eyes—and a personality as queerly simple as his physiology.

One of the aims of the original makers of his artificial species—though not the chief aim—had been to devise an extremely swift and nimble organism by eliminating as much weight and as many functions as possible. This aim they had achieved, but at the inescapable cost of making the creature absolutely dependent on its symbiotic partner or some other blood supply, and strictly limiting the duration of and extent of its activity before return to such blood supply became imperative.

These various limitations and his general fragileness did not bother Dickon in the least. Like all his kind, Dickon took a fatalistic and gently stoical view of things.

So it was without fear that Dickon negotiated the windy tubes. If there had been light, and anyone to see him, he might have been mistaken for a huge, reddish, furry spider, scuttling rapidly—for Dickon's most efficient speed was considerably higher than that of a man.

"Must find brother. Must find brother." The words repeated themselves in his mind with an unemotional, almost soothing insistence. Not only did he long for the warmth of his brother's side, flatly curled against which he had spent most of his days. He also wished to unburden his mind of certain facts, which he knew would greatly interest his brother, and which now filled his mind to bursting, like a box stuffed very full. That was very much how Dickon thought of his mind—as a little room behind his eyes, lined with boxes of memories, and in the middle of it a very little Dickon, who was his real self and peered out through the eye windows, and listened through the trumpets of his ears. In the room were two blackboards, one of them headed "Rules" and closely filled with writing; the other was blank. It was for his brother's thoughts.

Dickon's brother was the cardinal fact of his life. He was so close to him that at times Dickon felt himself to be nothing more than an extension of his brother's personality. There was good reason for this. Dickon absorbed his brother's emotions with the hormones of his brother's blood—indeed, the familiars spoke to one another of "frightened blood," "angry blood," and the like. Though such emotions were on the whole fleeting and did not greatly disturb the even tenor of Dickon's thoughts.

More important, Dickon was in every part of him a simplified version of his brother. In short, his brother's identical twin, developed from a cell of his brother's body that had undergone a process known as chromosome-stripping, a technique of microbiology discovered in the Golden Age and then supposedly lost. This process was based on the hypothesis that every creature possesses in its characteristic chromosome pattern the potentialities of many simpler creaures, both those which have occurred lower in the evolutionary scale and those which have not happened to occur at all. The stripping technique removed from his brother's chromosomes the determinants of sex, alimentation, and many other functions. But in all that remained, Dickon was his brother's identical twin. And this accounted for their telepathic contact.

When brain waves were first discovered by the Dawn Civilization, it was realized that, if telepathy did ever occur, it would most likely be between identical twins, since similarity of brain structure would mean similarity of brain waves—indicating that the two minds were in tune, like radio sending and receiving stations. But this idea had lain dormant until almost the end of the Golden Age, when it had been discovered that telepathy could only occur in such cases when one of the two stations was of a much simpler pattern than the other, thus doing away with certain otherwise unsurmountable interferences.

Production of simplified, symbiotic identical twins by the stripped-chromosome process had provided the solution. Briefly, the Golden Age had dreamed of extending the personality and increasing the powers of every individual by furnishing him with such a symbiotic partner. Then, in swift succession, had come darkened times, cessation of the research, loss of the process, more than world-wide chaos, establishment of the Hierarchy. Until, when the New Witchcraft first began, vastly detailed instructions had come from Asmodeus for the setting up of a breeding place and the creation of symbiotic identical twins, in imitation of the familiars of the ancient witchcraft and to serve the New Witchcraft in many ways.

From his birth, from his first conscious moment after being taken from the breeding tank, Dickon's thoughts had been immersed, bathed, in those of his brother—so that in a sense he had had no babyhood or childhood, but had thought adult thoughts from the start. Direct contact with his brother's mind had enabled him to reach full mental maturity within a few hours, and had also made it possible for him to achieve insights and understandings beyond the unaided capacities of his simplified nervous system. The chief other influence on his development was provided by his fellow familiars, his social equals, with whose minds he had telepathic contact of lesser degree and shorter range.

But his brother was much closer to him than any of them. So, as Dickon scuttled through the black branches of the wind tunnels seeking his brother, he came as close as he could, lacking a glandular system, to experiencing an emotion of his own.

Five more branches at the most, he told himself, before he would have to stop and be still. Then suddenly there appeared the dimmest trace of a picture on the blank blackboard of his mind.

He stopped. It began to fade. He moved forward. It faded all away. Back again then, and wait. After a while another picture started to appear, like a photograph developing—a photograph that moved and changed even as it developed. A feeling that would have been akin to fear had Dickon possessed emotion—a kind of mental drawing-back—filled the familiar's mind. There was something alien about the texture of his brother's thoughts—something disturbed, distorted. He had never seen quite that sort of mental landscape before. And yet it must be his brother's.

Without warning the picture disappeared, as it happened when his brother blanked his mind. Rapidly the tiny Dickon behind his eyes ran to the blackboard and wrote a message. Only now it seemed that the blackboard was somehow in his brother's mind as well as his own.

"Dickon is here, brother. Dickon writes on your mind."

His message vanished and instantly the blackboard became choked with such a hurly-burly of thoughts that Dickon knew his brother must be very startled and excited. And most of the thoughts had that odd alien tinge. Quickly, they were wiped away, as if his brother had realized they were too confused to be helpful, and a concise question replaced them.

"Can you understand me clearly, Dickon? Is contact sufficient?"

"Yes, but your thoughts are strange. And some of them seem hurt. Has someone injured your thoughts, brother?"

"A little, but I haven't time to explain." Here, Dickon got a fragmentary glimpse of Brother Dhomas and his laboratory in the crypts. "Except for the strangeness, present contact is sufficient?" the Black Man continued.

"Yes. But Dickon would like to come to you. Will you help Dickon find the way?"

"Sorry, Dickon, but it can't be done. They've got your brother locked up tight. Did you deliver my message?"

"No. Dickon could not. He found things very different from what they should be. He has much news for you."

"Tell it."

At that the little Dickon behind his eyes began to yank open the memory boxes.

"After Dickon left you in the room of sickness—do you still have that queer outside heart, brother?"

"No, I'm better now. You've been gone four days. Go on."

"Dickon went by the tunnels. First the little, then by a narrow burrowing into the big, then into the little again. But he did not find Drick or Drick's familiar at the place where Drick should be. So Dickon went to the Coven Chamber, since they should be meeting there. But in the tunnels below the chamber he found many familiars, Drick's among them—Jock, Meg, Mysie, Jill, Seth, and many more. Those familiars told Dickon he must not go to the Chamber for there were priests in it. There had been a meeting, they said, and all their Big People had been betrayed. Deacons had burst into the Chamber and captured their Big People, and they had only managed to escape because, as you know, brother, we familiars are taught instantly to conceal ourselves from any member of the Hierarchy, even if we are not commanded to. They were in bad shape, those familiars. They had lost contact with their Big People, and they did not know what to do. Many of them stood in need of blood.

"Dickon remembered that stores of blood for the newborn familiars are kept at the Breeding Place. So he gathered the lost familiars into a band, bidding the stronger help the weaker, and led them down, down through the tunnel to the

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Breeding Place. It was a hard trip. Toward the end many had to be carried. And if they had not known they were returning to their birthplace, I do not believe they would have made it.

"When Dickon and the other familiars finally arrived, they found there were no Big People in the Breeding Place either. It was deserted. The other familiars would have drunk the first ampules of blood they found, for they were famished. But Dickon held them back and would let none drink, until he found the case where is kept the blood-where-all-may-drink-in-safety.

"So Dickon left them gorging themselves with blood and sporting in the breeding tanks to warm themselves, and returned by the way he had come, for he knew his brother would want news of all these happenings, and he wished to know what his brother would want him to do now. But when he had retraced his path, he found that his brother was no longer where he had left him. He searched, but could not find his brother or his brother's thoughts. So he returned to the Breeding Place for fresh blood and came back to search again. This happened many times. Until at last he decided he must return no more, but find his brother or else stop moving. So he searched farther than ever before. And here he is."

Then Dickon wiped clean the blackboard in his mind, but no answer came—only a confusion of thoughts which told him that his brother was much disheartened by the news he had brought.

All lost, came the confused thoughts. Can it be that the Witchcraft is already beaten? The best of them captured. That must have been what Jarles was hinting at, Satan destroy him! How to get word to Asmodeus? If only—but that's impossible, and soon Brother Dhomas will—

And then only a jerky, wordless, mental landscape, tinged more than ever by the mood Dickon found so alien.

Suddenly the tiny Dickon behind his eyes caught sight of a small memory box that had not been opened.

"There is one thing I have not told you, brother. I do not know if it is of any importance.

"Dickon said that the Breeding Place was deserted when we reached it. That is true, so far as Big People are concerned. But there were two newborn familiars there, whom the Breeders must have left behind. They were two strange familiars—not of witches or warlocks."

"What do you mean?"

"You must know the one of them, brother. The familiar of that priest who was to be one of us, and who stayed at Mother Jujy's and who—"

"What does he look like?"

Rapidly, Dickon sketched on his mental blackboard the portrait of a dark-furred familiar.

"Jarles, by Satan!" He sensed his brother's sharp, sudden realization. "Of course, we were developing a cell from the tissue specimen! And the other one?"

Dickon sketched a mental portrait of a sallow-skinned familiar, whose black fur had a blue-steel tone to it.

"Goniface's!" And then for a time there came no further message, but Dickon sensed that his brother's mind was furiously plotting in the old way he knew so well. Obscurely, though he was without independent emotion, it comforted him. When words finally came, they were sharp and clear.

"Listen, Dickon. Those two newborn familiars. Did you touch minds with them?"

"Yes, a little. They are very stupid, since they have never been with their big twins. But some of the other familiars have been communing with them, seeking half in sport to teach them. They are making some progress."

"Do you think, if they were with you now, I could touch minds with them, through yours?"

"I think so, brother."

"Good. Listen carefully now. I want you to return to the Breeding Place and bring back those two newborn familiars with you. Each of you can carry an ampule of blood, so you will have a reserve supply—"

"Dickon never thought of that. It would have made everything so much easier. Poor, stupid Dickon!"

"No, no. You've done more than I ever hoped. But to continue, you are to bring the two others to the place where you are now, and seek to contact my mind. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Dickon answered gravely.

"Can you do it?" came the anxious message. "Return to the Breeding Place, I mean? Have you enough blood left for that?"

"I do not know," replied Dickon simply. "I came farther this time, hoping to draw blood from my brother when I found him."

"Sathanas!" Dickon sensed his brother's dismay. "Listen, Dickon, it is essential that you carry out my orders. Therefore I release you from the rule that forbids you to take blood from any other person but your brother. Take blood when and where you can get it!"

Dickon caught the afterthought and remarked quietly, "Dickon understands the peril to which his brother is referring. That was why he insisted the other familiars wait until he found the case of blood-that-all-may-drink-in-safety. He knows that if he takes a stranger's blood there is a chance he will die in swift convulsions. But life is a little thing—as little as Dickon—and Dickon does not mind."

He could not wholly comprehend the emotion that rose up then in his brother's mind, but it heartened him queerly.

"You'd better be starting, Dickon," came the final word from his brother. "It's a small hope that you're carrying—as small as you are. But it may be the only one for the whole world of Big People."

"Dickon will do what he can. Good-by, brother."

TO BE CONCLUDED.

Brass Tacks

The pilot of that small plane knew exactly where to strike the rocket to cause maximum derangement.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Hark to the voice of one who has read science-fiction for only three months, but who knows what he likes. (That's me, and I like Astounding.)

Now for my reactions to the February issue; and I do not have the least expectation that you will be influenced one iota by my praise or condemnation. I know that you print the stories you do only because you are trying to please everybody; and no one is compelled to buy Astounding if they don't like it. (And you should see how fast the copies disappear from the drugstore newsstand where I buy it!)

"The Weapon Makers."

Although I don't usually care for serials, anything of Van Vogt's is bound to be good—and this promises to be no exception. Alas, however—it is losing much of its effect through poor illustration. Kramer has talent for depicting machinery, but why does the poor guy in the Page 30 cut wear the same costume as his remote ancestors? I presume the cover illustration is from this same story, and but for a poor print job, would put its idea across much more forcefully.

"Opposites—React!"

Stewart disappointed me on the ending of this. It started out as a real thought-provoker, but descended to mediocrity after the end of the first installment. That is, the plot did—Stewart has done a fine job as far as the science structure of this tale goes. Still, I'd like to see a sequel, for there still remains the gigantic task of introducing contraterrene to the worlds.

"Mimsy Were the Borogoves."

This one had everything! Science, psychology, suspense, and an air of realism. There was no stiffness about the conversation, which you usually find where an author drags in a profound discussion by the skin of its teeth. After all, experts don't go around explaining their professions and theories to everyone they meet. Let's hear more from Padgett.

"Flight into Darkness."

Maybe I'm dumb—but not speechless, as this letter shows—but I can't see the connection between the title and the tale. Also, why should the impact of the comparatively small plane cause the rocket ship to explode? It has its stirring moments, but "Flight" is not outstanding.

"The Man in the Moon."

Not bad; not bad at all. I could go for a few more tales from Norton.

"God's Footstool" was above the usual run of articles, containing a little more of the "how" rather than exclusively concerning itself with dry theory—and the theory as presented wasn't so dry, after all.

Kuttner takes the cake in Probability Zero this time. The others are rehashes of old plots.

One last query as I close this overlong screed: What in the three worlds is that red-and-white knob on the weapon in the cover pix? It's just big and bright enough to spoil the whole balance of the picture.

Keep your mag as good as this ish, and you'll always have me for a reader.—Art Rapp, 2120 Bay, Saginaw, Michigan.

I still think they were interesting, off-trail ideas—rather neat little horrors.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Maybe in my undeveloped stage of adolescence. I have not yet developed the necessary imagination that is required for the consumption of some of the stories that are printed in your "sometimes" excellent magazine. I am referring to the stories like "Mimsy Were the Borogoves" and "The Twonky," neither one which made very much sense. But what's the idea? I don't get the drift.

Your really fine authors, such as A. E. von Vogt, Will Stewart, Malcolm Jameson, and Lester Del Rey, put out some real stuff most of the time. They work with things that people with a little knowledge of chemistry and physics can readily understand. But when a person's sleep is disturbed by a radio that washes dishes, or by a transparent cube that has little figures that build houses—that's *too* much.

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Outside of these few annoying slips, you have a very fine magazine, which I enjoy very much, even though it makes me mad for being born so many years too soon.—Bill Buhmiller, Box 438, Eureka, Montana.

Concerning the background of "Pelagic Spark."

Dear Mr. Campbell:

A comment in connection with my story, "Pelagic Spark."

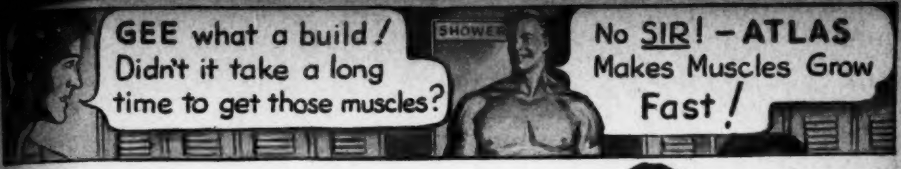
I've been noticing how often science and fantasy fiction writers use for their setting a future world resulting from an Axis victory; and I'd like to put in a word of defense before the Writers' War Board or some such jumps on us as defeatists.

We are not, thank God, prophets. We don't write what we feel sure is going to happen, but what, under certain circumstances, *might* happen. Our futures are so many possible Worlds-of-If evolving out of this present.

Now we aren't expecting an Axis victory, any more than we are expecting world-wide tidal waves or planetary collisions or the invasion of little green men from Alpha Centauri. These disasters are all, with varying probabilities, present in one or more of the possible Worlds-of-If.

And the more we write about ingenious ruses by which the Axis secures victory—in this story the development of a race-conscious American appeasement party—the less apt those ruses are to succeed, and the more certain we can be that my sons and your daughter will inherit, in deepest truth, the best of all Possible Worlds.—Anthony Boucher.

21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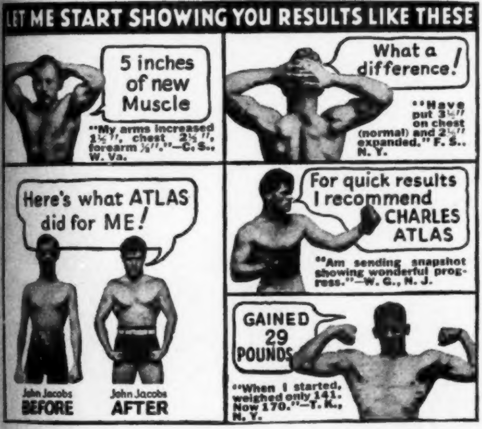
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What's My Secret?

"Dynamic Tension!" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—my way. I give you no gadgets or contraptions to fool with. When you have learned to develop your strength through *"Dynamic Tension,"* you can laugh at artificial muscle-makers. You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own God-given body—watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real solid LIVE MUSCLE.

My method—*"Dynamic Tension"*—will turn the trick for you. No theory—every exercise is practical. And, man, so easy! Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of *"Dynamic Tension"* almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY.

FREE BOOK
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I want the proof that your system of *"Dynamic Tension"* will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

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